



## Durham E-Theses

---

*John Adams: hostile to the republicanism of the United States: the development of his political thought from 1765*

Pound, John David Wedgwood

### How to cite:

---

Pound, John David Wedgwood (1999) *John Adams: hostile to the republicanism of the United States: the development of his political thought from 1765*, Durham theses, Durham University. Available at Durham E-Theses Online: <http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/4556/>

### Use policy

---

The full-text may be used and/or reproduced, and given to third parties in any format or medium, without prior permission or charge, for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes provided that:

- a full bibliographic reference is made to the original source
- a [link](#) is made to the metadata record in Durham E-Theses
- the full-text is not changed in any way

The full-text must not be sold in any format or medium without the formal permission of the copyright holders.

Please consult the [full Durham E-Theses policy](#) for further details.

# John Adams: "Hostile to the Republicanism of the United States"?

*The Development of his Political Thought from 1765.*

The copyright of this thesis rests with the author. No quotation from it should be published without the written consent of the author and information derived from it should be acknowledged.

JOHN DAVID WEDGWOOD POUND  
Candidate for Master of Arts (by Thesis)



*Department of Politics, University of Durham*

1999

23 MAY 2000

**Abstract of:**

**John Adams: "Hostile to the Republicanism of the United States"?  
The Development of his Political Thought from 1765.**

By John Wedgwood Pound, Candidate for Master of Arts (By Thesis), 1999.

A study of the development of John Adams's thought, from the Stamp Act of 1765 through thirty-five years of public service and a further twenty of reflective retirement. It draws principally upon his published works, *Dissertation on the Canon and Feudal Law*, the *Novanglus* Letters, *Defence of the Constitutions*, *Discourses on Davila*; and on his Diary, Autobiography and prolific correspondence with Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Rush, and others.

This examination of his political thought addresses his initial motives for opposition to the British Government and the way in which this position evolved into a more systematic theory of government. The principal focus for this Thesis lies in the examination of the cause and course of the evolution of this theory over the succeeding years, in relation to what might be termed the "mainstream" of republican thought. As such it comprises a discussion of the various and conflicting ideological sources and interpretations of the Revolution and of "republicanism" as an aspiration, an idealistic model and a practical form of government.

Changes in Adams's thought were determined by events, and his ideas are discussed in relation to the context of the early Republic, the growth of parties and domestic and foreign problems, particularly relations with France and Great Britain after the Revolution, and the cultural legacy of the latter and growing radical influence of the former after 1789. All this contributed to his concluding appraisal of the American people, and the state and future of the American Republic.

Consequently, it is with reference to these conclusions that the central contention will be addressed: his support for and understanding of the republican experiment. His place in the development of American thought, the validity of his analysis and a defence of his patriotism, undiminished by his honest, if impolitic frame of thought, is argued.

## Table of Contents

Chronology	2
Preface	6
I. John Adams's Revolution	8
II. The New England Way and the Logic of Rebellion	21
III. The Fall: The Disillusionment of John Adams	46
IV. Providence Over Error: The Justification for Hereditary Office-Holding	73
V. Lamentations	107
Appendix I: Genealogical Chart: <i>The Adams Family of Massachusetts</i>	130
Bibliography	132

### © Copyright Notice

The copyright of this thesis rests with the author. No quotation from it should be published without their prior written consent and information derived from it should be acknowledged.



## Chronology

Year	General Events	Adams Events
1735		(October 19th) Adams's Birth Braintree, Norfolk County Massachusetts.
1751		Enrols at Harvard
1753		(June) Starts his Diary
1755		(July) Graduates (August) Starts teaching at Worcester.
1756		(August) Starts Reading Law with James Putnam.
1761		(May) Death of his Father, Deacon John Adams. Inherits the Braintree Property  (November) Admitted to Practice in the Superior Court
1762		(August) Admitted barrister in the Superior Court.
1763	Conquest of Canada, end of the War with the French	(June) Humphrey Ploughjogger Correspondence.
1764		(October 25th) Marries Abigail Smith.
1765	The Stamp Act is passed.	(Aug-Oct) "A Dissertation of Canon and Feudal Law" in the <i>Boston Gazette</i> .  (September) Composes "Instructions to the Representatives of Braintree"
1766	Stamp Act Repealed, Declaratory Act Passed	
1773	(10th May) The Tea Act (16th December) Boston Tea Party	
1774		(June) Elected a Massachusetts Delegate to the Continental Congress.

Year	General Events	Adams Events
		(August & December) Re-elected to the Continental Congress
1775	(April) Skirmishes at Lexington and Concord, Massachusetts	(January-April) Publishes the "Novanglus Letters."
1776		(March-April) "Thoughts on Government" published in pamphlet form.
1776		(June-July) Appointed to the Committee to draft a Declaration of Independence.
	(July 4th) Declaration of Independence	
1777		(November) Joint Commissioner with Franklin and Arthur Lee to France.
1778	Proposed Constitution in Massachusetts Rejected	
1779		(August-November) Elected to represent Braintree in the Massachusetts Constitutional Convention. And drafts the Report.
1780	Proposed Massachusetts Constitution Accepted and Ratified	
		(December-Jan) Elected joint Commissioner to negotiate a Treaty of amity and commerce with the Netherlands.
1781	(19th October) Cornwallis surrenders	(June) Elected by Congress to treat for peace with Great Britain
		(July-Oct. 1782) Returns to Amsterdam.
1782		(Oct.-Nov.) Negotiations for peace with Great Britain.
1783	Peace Treaty with Great Britain.	(September 3rd) Signs as party to the Definitive Treaty with Great Britain.
1784		In Amsterdam:

Year	General Events	Adams Events
1785		(Feb.) Elected by Congress as America's first Minister to the Court of St. James.  (June 1st) Granted audience with King George III.
1786		(March-April) Tours England's Country Seats with Thomas Jefferson.
1787		(January) London: Publishes the first volume of the <i>Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States</i> .  (September) Second Volume
1788		(February 20th) Final audience with King George III  Third Volume of <i>Defence</i>  (June) Returns to Boston
1789	The French Revolution	Elected Vice-President
1790		(April) "Discourses on Davila" published in the <i>Gazette of the United States</i> .
1793	(-1815) Great Britain at War with France	(February) Re-elected Vice President
1796		(December) Elected President of the United States.
1797		(May-June) Appoints First Peace Mission to France.
1798	"XYZ Affair" (June-July) Alien and Sedition Act	
1799		Appoints 2nd Peace Mission to France.

Year	General Events	Adams Events
1800		(August-September) Alexander Hamilton's <i>Letter</i> attacking John Adams, general electoral chicanery.  (Sept-Oct) Quasi-War with France ended News arrives to late to affect the National Election.
1800		(December) Adams defeated by Thomas Jefferson.
1801		(January) "Midnight Appointments."
1802		(October) Starts Writing Autobiography. Part one completed in 1805.
1805		Publishes a collection of the <i>Discourse on Davila</i>
1806		Part Two of Autobiography
1807		Part Three of Autobiography. Dispute with Mercy Otis Warren.
1809		(April) <i>Boston Patriot Letters</i> .
1812	(-1814) At War with Great Britain	(Jan) Resumes correspondence with Thomas Jefferson.
1818		(Oct. 28th) Abigail Adams dies
1819		John Adams publishes collected edition of <i>Novanglus and Massachusettensis</i> .
1820		(November-December) Attends Massachusetts Constitutional Convention.
1824		(December) John Quincy Adams elected President of the United States.
1826	50th Anniversary of the Declaration of Independence	(July 4th) John Adams dies, as does Thomas Jefferson, a few hours before.



## *Preface*

He hated politics but loved political science, especially when he could apply theory to fact in his favourite trade of Constitution Making.<sup>1</sup>

John Adams, second President of the United States, played a key role in the Revolution and the early years of the new Republic. Stephen Kurtz confirms, regretfully, that "John Adams is seldom emphasised as one of the great Americans,"<sup>2</sup> and it is partly because of this that he is such an interesting study. It would be difficult not to warm to Adams as a sympathetic and perhaps an almost tragic character. Adams urged his son John Quincy to remember that the Founding Fathers were "Men like ourselves"; his diaries, autobiography and letters expose his very human foibles and an honest eccentricity which has become the bane of his historical reputation.

The development of his thought from 1765 is driven by events: it is an evolutionary process and a strong seam of consistency runs throughout it. There is a bed-rock of Adams principles which are at the base of all his changing attitudes and ideas. His greatest significance lies, perhaps not with his revolutionary activities, or his time as President, but with the understanding of the conflict between radical innovation and the passing world which can be understood through his writings and the opposition of others to them.

This is not to deny that he was a radical figure, for he was in his own particular Adams way, but he was not innovative. As a result, he was left behind, out of step, out

---

<sup>1</sup> Clinton Rossiter, "The Legacy of John Adams" *Yale Review* No. 4, vol. 46, (1957).

## PREFACE

of favour, estranged from an America which was developing through an innovative spirit. He was ill at ease with this America as it developed after the Revolution, he was dissatisfied with the Revolution, and did not understand the direction the country was moving in.

In comprehending the reasons for this, and the terms in which he described his disillusion, it can be understood in what sense he was, and was not, hostile to the Republicanism of the United States.

---

<sup>2</sup> Stephen G. Kurtz, *The Presidency of John Adams and the Collapse of Federalism 1795-1800* (Philadelphia, 1957), p.13.

CHAPTER I

*John Adams's Revolution*

Mausoleums, statues, monuments will never be erected to me...Romances will never be written, nor flattering orations spoken, to transmit me to posterity in brilliant colours. No, nor in true colours...<sup>1</sup>

John Adams has always been cast in the shadow of his more romantic contemporaries. During his long retirement he was engaged in a battle to be accorded his due credit, yet he knew he would be relegated in the wake of Washington, Jefferson, and to his particular displeasure; Franklin who considered him "always honest, sometimes mad"<sup>2</sup>. They were men who seemed to satisfy more the required attributes of "American legends"<sup>3</sup> whereas Adams's character and reputation does not fit comfortably with the criteria, and he has perhaps been one of the least celebrated of the Founding Fathers.

Unlike the venerated Jefferson, Adams has no special appeal to any one group, never liberal, and rarely conservative. His neglect by the latter may be due in part to his relative inaccessibility; he is rarely quoted, and his works have long been out of print.<sup>4</sup> Some historians, from the 1950s, endeavoured to recognise Adams's role as a major figure of the Revolution, as a "Colossus of Independence."<sup>5</sup> Others however continue to regard him with suspicion, passing over his contribution during his youth

---

<sup>1</sup> Letter: John Adams to Dr. Benjamin Rush, 23rd March 1809, Douglass Adair and John A. Schutz (eds.), *The Spur of Fame: Dialogues of John Adams and Benjamin Rush, 1805-1813* (San Marino, California, 1966), p.139.

<sup>2</sup> *The Writings of Jefferson*, Paul L. Ford (ed.) (New York, 1892-99), 5:104.

<sup>3</sup> Notwithstanding of course, the toll which revisionist historians have taken against Washington and Jefferson. However, even in these politically correct times, the reverence with which such figures are held is enduring. It is perhaps significant that revisionist historians do not seem to bother with a revisionist view of Mr. Adams.

<sup>4</sup> The gradual publication of the Adams Family Papers, begun in the late 1960s, and still in progress, may in the future remedy this. The volumes completed so far (in addition to the Diary of Charles Francis Adams) include his *Diary and Autobiography* (L. H. Butterfield *et al.* [Ed.]), his early essays and correspondence up to the 1780s; *Papers* 1-8, (Robert J. Taylor *et al.* [Ed.]), and vol. 9 (Lint *et al.* [Ed.]) and *Adams Family Correspondence* (L. Butterfield *et al.* [ed.]).

<sup>5</sup> Clinton Rossiter, "The Legacy of John Adams" *Yale Review* vol. 46, No. 4 (1957).

and concentrating on his later reputation as a political figure from which they conclude that he was “a vain, pompous, and ill-tempered man, who had besides, some ridiculous notions of royalty.”<sup>6</sup> Such an epitaph has some truth, certainly regarding his self-acknowledged vanity. However, as I will endeavour to demonstrate throughout, his views on aristocracy and monarchy have been much misunderstood. His critics, contemporaries and those of the present day, are apt to read his works already convinced by his reputation. He feared that this would be his fate;<sup>7</sup> indeed even his closest friends,<sup>8</sup> and his wife Abigail, misunderstood his position.<sup>9</sup> His works and later thought were seen as a travesty of the Constitution, rather than a defence,<sup>10</sup> composed to subvert rather than support, as he claimed, “the Republicanism of the United States”.<sup>11</sup>

## THE RELUCTANT REVOLUTIONARY

In the partisan times in which he found himself, during the 1790s in particular, these accusations were serious. Yet despite these charges of subversion, perhaps comparable to “un-American activities” of the 1950s, far from being disloyal, Adams was an early and steadfast “friend of liberty”,<sup>12</sup> a vociferous “High American”<sup>13</sup> who

<sup>6</sup> Zoltan Haraszti, *John Adams and the Prophets of Progress* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1952), pp.1-37; Ralph Adams Brown, *The Presidency of John Adams* (Lawrence, 1975), p.viii.

<sup>7</sup> “Taylor Letters”, 15th April 1814, Charles Francis Adams (ed.) *Life and Works of John Adams* (Boston, 1850-56), 6:447. (Hereafter *Works*).

<sup>8</sup> Dr. Benjamin Rush and Thomas Jefferson, I believe, both laboured under a variety of misapprehensions regarding his true beliefs. In the most part a mis-reading of his *Defence of the Constitutions* and *Discourses on Davila* was the cause.

<sup>9</sup> Richard A. Ryerson, “‘Like a Hare before the Hunters’: John Adams and the Idea of Republican Monarchy”, *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, vol. 106 (1995) p.16, citing a letter from Abigail Adams to John Quincy Adams, March 20th 1787.

<sup>10</sup> James Madison called them a “Mock Defence” generally “unfriendly to Republicanism”, and during his political career selective readings from them were used against him by his political opponents. (Letter: James Madison to Thomas Jefferson, 12 May 1791, *Papers of James Madison XIV*, W.T. Hutchinson *et al.* (eds.), Chicago, 1962).

<sup>11</sup> “Taylor Letters”, *Works* 6:448.

<sup>12</sup> “Autobiography”, *The Diary and Autobiography of John Adams*, (Butterfield *et al.* [eds.] Cambridge Massachusetts, 1961), 3:357. (Hereafter cited as *Diary and Autobiography*).

<sup>13</sup> “Autobiography”, *Diary and Autobiography* 3:290.

identified and worked for her interests above all else. George Wirt considered him the man to whom America was most indebted: "John Adams of Boston...is the one who sustained the debate and by the force of his reasoning demonstrated...the justice...[and] the expediency of the measure."<sup>14</sup>

Indeed he and to a *lesser* extent Jefferson made themselves conspicuous and provoked considerable rancour in the Continental Congress by their radicalism. Adams was loathed by those delegates of a more conservative outlook who were timid about the prospect of Independence and favoured renewed efforts for reconciliation.<sup>15</sup> In his *Autobiography* Adams recalls an enmity between himself and certain Quaker families from that day "until this 2[nd of] April 1805,"<sup>16</sup> mentioning in particular John Dickenson, a delegate in the Congress, whose whole family were opposed to Independence. As he records in his Diary, following a confrontation a few days before:

Walking to the Statehouse this morning, I met Mr. Dickenson, on Foot in Chestnut Street. We met, and passed near enough to touch elbows. He passed without moving his Hat, or Head or Hand. I bowed and pulled off my Hat. He passed haughtily by....I shall for the future pass him, in the same manner. But I was determined to make my bow, that I might know his temper. We are not to be upon speaking terms, nor bowing terms, for the time to come.<sup>17</sup>

Adams was not without sympathy for Dickenson; rather, he gave thanks that his wife and his immediate and extended family were of like mind.<sup>18</sup> This is somewhat surprising given his wife's background, but perhaps not in relation to his own. His

---

<sup>14</sup> Charles Adams; editorial citation in "Diary", *Works* 3:57.

<sup>15</sup> "Diary", November 1775, *Diary and Autobiography*, 2:161; Edmund S. Morgan, *The Birth of the Republic 1769-89* (3rd edn. Chicago, 1992), pp.61-64.

<sup>16</sup> "Autobiography", *Diary and Autobiography*, 3:316.

<sup>17</sup> 16th September 1775, "Diary", *Diary and Autobiography*, 2:173.

<sup>18</sup> "Autobiography", *Diary and Autobiography* 3:316.

wife Abigail,<sup>19</sup> who was more conservative than himself, was from the Massachusetts elite which so frustrated Adams in his youth.<sup>20</sup>

His own forebears, "all of the middle rank of people", less illustrious and of little account outside Braintree, were nevertheless "...sober, industrious, frugal and religious...always unencumbered with debts and as independent as human nature is or ought to be in the world."<sup>21</sup> Adams often exaggerated the humble origins and status of his family, partly in order to counteract charges of aristocratic leanings, but this pose changed with the company.

He was of Puritan stock,<sup>22</sup> and the old Puritan custom of diary or journal keeping manifested itself in Adams, who otherwise, whilst a firm believer, lacked the fervency of devotion characteristic of his God-fearing forebears.<sup>23</sup> His Diary, after the initial weeks of meteorological commentary, shows a free spirit and a lively and engaged mind. That his mind was so often engaged in "sailing boats...flying kites"<sup>24</sup> and "gallanting the girls",<sup>25</sup> and his wish to be a farmer like his younger brothers, earned stern words from his father, who wanted him to enter the Ministry.

His father, accordingly, sent him to Harvard; however the Church was not for Adams. Whilst his Diary abounds with speculations on religious matters and a shows a devotion to Protestantism, he was disheartened by the theological wrangling and the

---

<sup>19</sup>Abigail Smith, a third cousin, daughter of the Rev. Smith, of Weymouth, Massachusetts. Her mother was a Quincy who was descended from the de Quincy family, Norman Earls of Winchester, of which Adams was proud, despite himself. In disposition she was more conservative than John Adams. *Burke's Landed Gentry of the British Empire, American Supplement: "American Families with British Ancestry"*, (London, 1939); Jack Shepherd, *The Adams Chronicles: Four Generations of Greatness* (Boston, 1975). See Appendix I *The Adams Family of Massachusetts - Genealogical Chart*.

<sup>20</sup> John Ferling, *John Adams: A Life* (New York, 1996), pp.10-12.

<sup>21</sup> "Autobiography", *Diary and Autobiography*, 3:254.

<sup>22</sup> The Progenitor of the family in Massachusetts, Henry Adams, emigrated with his family in 1638 as a Puritan exile from Barton David, Somerset. (*Burke's Landed Gentry of the British Empire* [American Supplement]).

<sup>23</sup> Mark Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada* (London, 1992), pp.41-47.

<sup>24</sup> "Autobiography", *Diary and Autobiography*, 3:257.

<sup>25</sup> "Autobiography", *Diary and Autobiography*, 3:260.

nature of Church politics. Instead he turned to the law as a means of success and the "achievement of a Reputation."<sup>26</sup>

The Puritan background of his family influenced his character and his thought in other respects; certainly his views of human nature and the nature and role of government were influenced by Calvinist theology and the Puritan experience respectively. He had a strong and motivating sense of Puritan heritage and faith in a certain Providence for New England, founded through adversity, nurtured by dissent, which could be cited to explain his role in rebellion against the same power that had driven his forebears into the wilderness.<sup>27</sup> Yet this does not fully explain his motives, neither his later support for, nor his early reluctance towards independence. He was no ideologue, his disposition was not rebellious, and his participation, during the Revolution and thereafter, extensive as it was, was reluctant and in the long term lamented.<sup>28</sup> Howe writes:

Few persons were more active in the American political scene during the years 1765 to 1800 than John Adams. First as constitutional adviser to the Massachusetts Patriots on matters of English liberty and empire organisation, then as leader of the Whig cause in the Continental Congress, then as theoretician of the new state governments, next as American representative in the Courts of western Europe and finally as Vice-President and President under the national constitution...<sup>29</sup>

But Howe does not sufficiently consider his reluctance in nearly all of these roles. In September 1772 he resolves not to engage in politics further,<sup>30</sup> and in November of the same year he is again checking himself: "...I must remember Temperance, Exercise and Peace of Mind. Above all things I must avoid Politics, Political Clubs,

<sup>26</sup> "Autobiography", *Diary and Autobiography*, 3:260.

<sup>27</sup> "Dissertation on the Canon and Feudal Law" No.4, 21st October 1765, *Papers*, (Taylor, et al. (ed.), Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1977-), 1:126. (Hereafter *Papers*).

<sup>28</sup> He writes to Moses Gill in June 1775 of his initial reluctance for revolt, and his own regrets at the action (*Works* 9:256) though he expresses the view of it as absolutely necessary in a letter to Dr. S. Morse, 29th November 1815, (*Works* 10:186).

<sup>29</sup> John Howe, *The Changing Political Thought of John Adams* (Princeton, New Jersey, 1966), p.3.

Town Meetings, General Court, &c. &c.”<sup>31</sup> Yet he was driven by a sense of duty, founded in the participatory traditions of his Province, and his understanding of those traditions, an identification which meant that he considered the American Revolution as the culmination of a series of events. He later claimed that he had always dreaded the Revolution as “fraught with ruin” for himself and his family,<sup>32</sup> yet as I show in the next chapter he was driven by the force and logic of his own argument in opposition to the Stamp Act of 1765 and subsequent Parliamentary threats to American liberties.

## THE ORIGINS OF REVOLUTION

The Revolution as “an agent for profound change”<sup>33</sup> in loosening the “social bonds”<sup>34</sup> unleashed powerful and unpredictable forces in society. Although less destructive than some Tories had predicted,<sup>35</sup> these forces were more disruptive and challenging to authority in the short and long term than the sanguine hopes of the Whigs had anticipated. For the most part, however, their optimism endured: they were confident in their enterprise, which they saw as representing, the last hope for liberty in the world.<sup>36</sup>

Motives were mixed, as diverse as the individual, and frequently quarrelling, colonies.<sup>37</sup> The millennial aspect of their thought aside, the Revolution perhaps also represented an over-reaction on the part of the Whigs, the result of a paranoia, and perhaps even, as Wood suggests viewing the Revolution in terms of psycho-history, a

---

<sup>30</sup> “Diary”, 16th September 1772, *Diary and Autobiography*, 2:63.

<sup>31</sup> “Diary”, 21st November 1772; *Ibid.* 2:67.

<sup>32</sup> Letter: John Adams to Dr. S. Morse, 29th November 1815, *Works* 10:186.

<sup>33</sup> Morgan, *The Birth of the Republic*, p.24.

<sup>34</sup> Letter: John Adams to Abigail Adams, April 14th 1776, *Adams Family Correspondence* 1:281-2

<sup>35</sup> Gordon Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic 1776-1787* (Chapel Hill, 1969, 1998) pp.66-67; William Nelson, *The American Tory*, (Oxford, 1961) pp.12-16

<sup>36</sup> Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Enlarged ed., Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1992), pp.85-90.



certain madness.<sup>38</sup> More particularly, was it primarily a struggle for power, for self rule? Were the main motives founded in economic interest, provoked by the tax on tea? Or rather, the principle at stake in its imposition?<sup>39</sup> Or was it rooted in an alternative ideal for society, and ostensibly prosecuted for this end, the Common Good? Against the opportunistic interpretation, the Revolution can be seen as representing the culmination of a process of inevitable disassociation and a more consciously ideological enterprise, a "Utopian movement" to found a virtuous Republican alternative to the corruption which had driven the colonists from their motherland.<sup>40</sup>

Interpretations of the American Revolution and its causes and objectives have altered with the prevailing intellectual mood. In the early years of the new Republic history was that of the victors, and was therefore skewed to their interests.<sup>41</sup> Adams was disappointed by the partisan nature of Mercy Otis Warren's *Whig History*, which was a vehicle for an attack on the contemporary conservative interests in the country which Adams, however unwillingly, represented. Such was his disillusionment in later years with popular conceptions of the Revolution that he anticipated and indeed longed for a Tory history, fully expecting it to be an account nearer the truth.<sup>42</sup>

Warren's view represented just one version of the Revolution; this and the later political controversies of which Adams was very much a part reflect the divisions that

<sup>37</sup> Morgan, *The Birth of the Republic* pp.6-8.

<sup>38</sup> Gordon Wood, "Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style: Causality and Deceit in the Eighteenth Century" *William and Mary Quarterly* 3rd series, 39 (1982); Wood, *Creation of the American Republic*, pp.16-17.

<sup>39</sup> The colonists were taxed much less than their fellow subjects in Great Britain. Taxes in America, however, increased after the Revolution. (Patrice Higonnet, *Sister Republics: The Origins of French and American Republicanism* [Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1988], pp.171-3).

<sup>40</sup> Wood, *Creation of the American Republic*, p.229; John Diggins, *The Lost Soul of American Politics* (New York, 1984), pp.10-11, 29-31.

<sup>41</sup> Lester Cohen, "Creating a Usable Future: The Revolution Historians and the National Past," in J.P.Greene (ed.), *The American Revolution, its Character and Limits* (New York, 1987), pp.309-330.

existed within the Revolutionary movement. The movement was a broad church, and as such was subject to schism once the immediate danger had subsided and independence had been achieved.

Subsequent nineteenth century British and Canadian Tory histories and particularly modern, less emotional and more objective accounts seek to understand the case of the Loyalists and delve deeper to understand the varying motives of the rebels; the degree of utopian ideology, opportunistic realism and chance, or perhaps Providence.<sup>43</sup> The ideological sources of the Revolution, their relative importance, or indeed whether any significant homogeneity of ideological purpose existed, have been extensively debated.<sup>44</sup>

The early Imperial School emphasised the “maturation” argument that sees the Revolution as the culmination of a process, representing the inevitable conclusion of constitutional developments in England and America, in particular the achievement of considerable autonomy and the ascendance of the colonial assemblies.<sup>45</sup>

A more complex view developed from the 1950s embracing this and a new appraisal comprising two principal aspects. The first represents an incisive analysis of the Lockean, Whig view of a “just rebellion” based on “social contract” theory. Secondly, a “Neo-Whig” view provides a more detailed critique of power and conceptions of imperative constitutional safeguards, developed further to embrace an austere and demanding ideal of a virtuous Republic, free from the threat posed by a standing army, from the corruption of dependence, patronage, and extremes of

---

<sup>42</sup> Letter: John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, July 3rd, 1813 (Lester Cappon [ed.]) *The Adams-Jefferson Letters: The Correspondence Between Thomas Jefferson and Abigail and John Adams* (2 vols.) (Chapel Hill, 1959), 2:349-50. (Hereafter *Adams-Jefferson Letters*).

<sup>43</sup> Bernard Bailyn, *Faces of the Revolution* (New York, 1990), pp.205-10.

<sup>44</sup> Shalhope, “Toward a Republican Synthesis: The Emergence of an Understanding of Republicanism in American Historiography”, *William and Mary Quarterly* (3rd Series) 29, (1972).

<sup>45</sup> Marc Engal, *A Mighty Empire: The Origins of the American Revolution* (Ithaca, 1988), pp.10-20.

inequality present in the British body politic and which were ultimately the cause of their problems.<sup>46</sup>

According to Republican theory a sense of citizenship had to be engendered and maintained, and an all pervasive sense of civic duty in the people and in their chosen leaders was necessary. Whilst all states need virtue, for a Republic which lacks the explicit deference, sense of obligation based on superstition, custom and feudal obligation which monarchies have, it is vital.<sup>47</sup>

Achievement of the common good therefore requires strength of character and a particular social condition, a prerequisite that is fragile and vulnerable to corruption, and is endangered by time and wealth. Virtue will fail, corruption, the antithesis of virtue, will enter in if land and money is concentrated in a few hands, for this will create dependence. In this argument Harrington is influential in the case for American virtue and, therefore, their capacity for a republican society. He states that the distribution of political power must be analogous to the distribution of property for the republic to survive. American conditions - the broad base of land-ownership, a high level of political education and participation - had enabled a sense of citizenship to become well developed.<sup>48</sup>

The pamphlets of the era, which Adams urged all future historians to study, transmit these republican ideals, and portray the development of the revolutionary consciousness, the perception of the threats from British corruption, and the ideological zeal which gave impetus and a moral dimension to the Revolution and the vision for the post-Revolutionary America. Bernard Bailyn, in his extensive study of

---

<sup>46</sup> Bailyn, *Ideological Origins*, pp.132-4; J. G. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment* (Princeton, 1975), pp.465-475.

<sup>47</sup> Pocock, *Machiavellian Moment*, pp. 334, 361, 462-7.

the pamphlets of the period, has demonstrated the significant influence of republican ideas from a mix of classical, seventeenth and early eighteenth century sources. Particularly significant from the 1760s was the Commonwealthman tradition, Gordon and Trenchard's *Independent Whig* and *Cato*, and other tracts of the "Country" Opposition to the administration of Walpole.<sup>49</sup>

Isaac Kramnick has sought to counter the republican tradition, in particular its anti-individualistic implications with a partial return to the traditional liberal interpretation by emphasising the incompatibility of republicanism with the spirit of the age. Republicanism demands a passion for, and sacrifice of personal interest to, the common good, and a degree of disinterestedness which Kramnick claims is untenable given the emergent middle class individualism and demand for rights during the eighteenth century.<sup>50</sup> He maintains that such idealistically medieval, civic humanistic concerns, were of very little influence in thought or behaviour. He sees the American Revolution as an expression of middle class radicalism and the struggle for empowerment that was also taking place in Great Britain.<sup>52</sup>

Further, he claims that the republican ideas of the seventeenth century Commonwealth were discredited and of little influence in England or America. He emphasises the influence of Locke which was indeed strong, invoked by Patriot and

---

<sup>48</sup> Pocock, *Machiavellian Moment*, pp. 387-90, 498-501, 513; Wood, *Creation of the American Republic*, pp.217-9; Richard Dagger, *Civic Virtue: Rights, Citizenship and Republican Liberalism* (New York, 1997), p.16; John Adams "Dissertation", *Papers* 1:108-9.

<sup>49</sup> Bailyn, *Ideological Origins*, pp. 15-27; Pauline Maier, *Resistance to Revolution*, (New York, 1991), p.27.

<sup>50</sup> Isaac Kramnick, "Republican Revisionism Revisited" *American Historical Review*, vol. 87 (1982) pp.632-6; Dagger *Civic Virtue*, pp.18-20.

<sup>51</sup> Isaac Kramnick, "Republican Revisionism Revisited" pp.632-6; Dagger, *Civic Virtue*, pp.18-21.

<sup>52</sup> Kramnick, "Republican Revisionism Revisited". As part of his case he cites the new Industrialists, often non-conformist with radical views for reform. In particular he cites Josiah Wedgwood FRS, (1730-1795), nonconformist, supporter of the American Revolution, Anti-Slavery campaigner, and proponent of Parliamentary Reform. Adams visited Wedgwood and his factory whilst he was in England: November 1783. (Extract of "Letter to the Boston Patriot" 17th February 1812, *Diary and Autobiography*, 3:151).

Tory alike, cited in the key debates as Adams notes in his Diary.<sup>53</sup> Adams also notes, however, that with Locke, the works of Harrington and Sidney, and other republican writers drawn upon, whilst they were "little attended to in England" were well read and had special meaning to the colonists and their perceived position.<sup>54</sup>

Kramnick I think makes too little of the significant influence of republican thought which is present within the diversity of ideological sources. The themes are republican, as are the aspirations to virtuous disinterested leadership. All contributed to the construction of a corrupt image of England and the Americans' contrasting virtue. This "last act of the Renaissance" was a key part of Adams's own Revolutionary commitment.<sup>55</sup>

## JOHN ADAMS'S REVOLUTION

In 1768, Adams had addressed himself with the following challenge in his Diary: "Am I grasping at money or scheming for power? Am I planning for an illustration of my family<sup>56</sup> or the welfare of my country?"<sup>57</sup> In the event his aims may be regarded as laudable, not directed towards acquisition, nor the achievement of power, despite the claims of his detractors. What is clear is that from a very early point his motives were

<sup>53</sup> *Diary and Autobiography*, 2:129 (Diary), 3:309, (Autobiography).

<sup>54</sup> "Thoughts on Government", *Works* 3:193; Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment*, pp.466-9.

<sup>55</sup> Pocock, *Machiavellian Moment* pp.466-9

<sup>56</sup> The "illustration of his family" he *did* establish. His son John Quincy Adams (1767-1848), like his father was Minister to the Court of St. James, and became the only son of a President, to date, to have become President himself. His time there was perhaps as unhappy as his that of his father, and he is remembered in history more for his fight against slavery as a Congressman. His son, Charles Francis Adams (1807-86), was also Minister to London. Charles Francis Adams, Jr. (1835-1915), was a historian, and sometime president of the Union Pacific Railroad. His two brothers, Henry Adams (1838-1918) and Brooks Adams (1848-1927), were also historians, the latter famous for his dire predictions, in the style his forebear, regarding American democracy, which he saw as approaching the nadir of degeneration. Changing demographics in the Boston area meant for this most English of dynasties a decline in their political fortunes, as they largely refused to pander to the Irish vote. Except for Charles Francis Adams (1866-1954), who served as Secretary of the navy during the Herbert Hoover administration, subsequent generations of the Adams family have abstained from political participation. Jack Shepherd, *The Adams Chronicles: Four Generations of Greatness, passim*.

<sup>57</sup> "Diary", January 30th 1768, *Diary and Autobiography*, 1:208.

determined by his commitment to his family and to his country, the latter object initially Massachusetts or New England, and later, with similar devotion, the United States of America.

Adams will be found to straddle the two principal interpretative positions. That is, he was driven both by the vision of a virtuous Republic, and by the logic of his own legal, constitutional, arguments, as I will show in the next chapter, Chapter II. The retrospective tone of his *Dissertation on the Canon and Feudal Laws* (1765) would tend to support the Imperial School view, whilst its descriptions of New England virtue shows the basis of Adams's initial enthusiasm for the republican alternative. His later arguments in the *Novanglus Letters*, "the most important newspaper battles of the Revolution",<sup>58</sup> show the constitutional and legal aspect of his arguments, whilst his commitment to the cause was founded in his positive appraisal of the American people at that time.

As his view of American virtue changed, so too did his conclusions about the form which America's republican government should take. The initiation of this disillusionment from the late 1770s is dealt with in Chapter III, as is the consequential change in his thought. Employing, as he had consistently done, political principles based upon an appreciation of unchanging human nature revealed through centuries of experience, he modified his expectations of his countrymen. Accordingly his whole view of society changes as he moved from a reliance upon a purely institutional balance in government, to a more sociological view.

His political theory, based on the demands of social strife, that is the need for government to regulate the passions of men, developed further throughout the 1780s and 1790s. Perceiving the American people as little different from their European kin,

he anticipated the eventual need to introduce European practices. This refuge in the patterns of the Old World, addressed in Chapter IV, came at a time of increasingly radical and innovative democratic republicanism in the United States, to which Adams was irreconcilably opposed.

Adams died on July 4th 1826,<sup>59</sup> the fiftieth anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. During the preceding weeks he had been asked to provide a suitably patriotic message. He did, simply "Independence Forever." The Revolution for him had been one of dashed hopes. Whilst he remained as committed to American interests as ever, and to the maintenance of her independence, his foreboding for the future, discussed in Chapter V, dominated his retirement. Beyond Independence from Great Britain, he had little optimism for the future.

---

<sup>58</sup> James M. Farrell, "New England's Cicero: John Adams and the Rhetoric of Conspiracy" *Proceeding of the Massachusetts Historical Society* vol. 104, 1992.

<sup>59</sup> Thomas Jefferson had died a few hours before.

CHAPTER II

*The New England Way and the Logic of Rebellion*

The Common People were held together in Clans and Herds in a state of Servile Dependence on their Lords, bound by the tenure of their lands to follow them to their wars whenever they commanded, and in a state of total ignorance of everything divine and human...<sup>1</sup>

Bernard Bailyn in the *Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* describes the varied, eclectic, and potentially contradictory influences that contributed to the revolutionary consciousness and movement. Nevertheless, he regards the frequent citations from the ancient classics “everywhere in the literature of the Revolution” as primarily “illustrative, not determinative of thought.” The themes taken up in the pamphlets of the era demonstrate a potent mix of English republican thought: Harrington, Bolingbroke, Milton, with the constitutional and legal theory of Locke, de Montesquieu and Coke. Elements of the radical “Real” Whig opposition ideology, their critique and suspicion of power, and their perception of irretrievable corruption and a creeping, destructive malaise in the British body politic, contributed to the near irresistible logic of rebellion.<sup>2</sup>

These authorities and influences appealed to the equally diverse interests of the people in the different colonies previously engaged in conflict with each other.<sup>3</sup> Whilst the fundamentally different assumptions and beliefs encompassed by these regional and cultural factions were the cause of future political conflict over the “meaning” of the Revolution, they created the broad base necessary for uniting them in defence of their common liberties.

---

<sup>1</sup> John Adams, “Dissertation on the Canon and Feudal Laws”, Draft c. August 1765, *Papers*, 1:110.

<sup>2</sup> Bernard Bailyn, *The Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1992), p.27.

<sup>3</sup> Edmund S. Morgan, *The Birth of the Republic* (Chicago, 1992), pp.5-6.



Adams personified, in his position as a revolutionary, the synthesis of these influences which contributed to the general arguments for the break with the mother country. Dr. Benjamin Rush, who thought of Adams and Jefferson as the “North and South Poles of the American Revolution...”, considered their principal contributions to have been that they had “thought” for all Americans.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps, as Wood suggests, referring to his later life, Adams “thought too much.”<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless he could not read enough, he had a passion for books,<sup>6</sup> and he was perhaps the best read of his generation in America, his reading embracing history, law, politics, even European romances, from which he was to extract political lessons.<sup>7</sup> His legal training, in addition to introducing further works and influences, fostered his habit of analysis which drew from these sources, all of which he viewed within the context of his Puritan background and New England perspective.

He was fundamentally a New Englander, in disposition, approach, reaction, style, prejudices, ideals and motivation. Hence, although he aspired to an *objective* study of political science, his thought is inevitably a product of his New England background, which is reflected in all facets of it, his reactions to events, his conception of the people, and his ideas for the future, post-revolutionary, form of government.

## THE NEW ENGLAND WAY

Adams came to appreciate that the immediate threat to the rights and liberties of the colonies came from the “ambitious envious Pretenders to Patriotism”, a Tory junto on their own shores, who schemed for their own interests and preferment, misinforming

---

<sup>4</sup> Letter: Dr. Benjamin Rush to John Adams quoted in Joseph Ellis, *Passionate Sage: The Character and Legacy of John Adams* (New York, 1993), p.113.

<sup>5</sup> Gordon Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic* (Chapel Hill, 1969, 1998), p.567.

<sup>6</sup> “Autobiography”, *Diary and Autobiography*, 3:261.

<sup>7</sup> Zoltan Haraszti, *John Adams and the Prophets of Progress*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1952), p.15-24.

the British Government “...sapping the foundations of society and violating the laws of morality and decency.”<sup>8</sup>

This is Adams at his most radical, railing against Governor Bernard and the Hutchinson faction.<sup>9</sup> His first substantial political activity came in 1763 when he was involved in an exchange of letters, under pseudonyms, in the local press with his friend Jonathan Sewall concerning the “blind factionalism” with which Massachusetts politics was riven.<sup>10</sup> Adams adopted the persona of a dim-witted “hick farmer”, Humphrey Ploughjogger, and in simple, frank, common-sense terms, and with skilful use of irony, embellished with phonetic spelling, derided the grandees and their political machinations.<sup>11</sup>

Two years later in 1765 in opposition to the Stamp Act Adams truly inaugurated his political career and initiated his political writings. In 1767 Ploughjogger was once again countering Sewall (*alias* “Philanthrope”), who, partly for the interests of his career defended the “patriotism” of Bernard who had supported the enforcement of the Stamp Act.<sup>12</sup> Adams objected to the corruption of good men by party interests, and in 1768 refused the post procured for him by Sewall, at the Court of the Admiralty. To have accepted such a post would have rendered him beholden to a Government whose motives and integrity he suspected, and which in consequence was “wholly inconsistent with...[his] ideas of Right, Justice and Policy...”<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> John Adams as “Misanthrope” *The Boston Gazette* 1765, *Papers*, 1:184; “Novanglus” *Works* 3:12-17; *Papers*, 2:233-9.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Hutchinson, later Governor of Massachusetts. The Hutchinson Family monopolised offices in Massachusetts.

<sup>10</sup> As a Tory exile Sewall met Adams for the last time in London after Independence.

<sup>11</sup> *Papers* 1:58-94 letters writing as “U” (a more scholarly persona) and “Humphrey Ploughjogger” 3rd March-5th September 1763; John Ferling, *John Adams* (New York, 1996), pp.36-40; Helen Saltzberg Saltman, “John Adams’s Earliest Essays: the Humphrey Ploughjogger Letters”, *William and Mary Quarterly* 3rd series, 37 (1980).

<sup>12</sup> *Papers*, 1:58-94.

<sup>13</sup> *Diary and Autobiography*, 2:53 (“Diary”), 3:287-88 (“Autobiography”).

Writing also as “Misanthrope” and as “Governor Winthrop” he attempted to invoke a nostalgia for a purer time and an appreciation of the danger of corruption to the New England way.<sup>14</sup> This imposing sense of the rich social, political and religious New England heritage had influenced his stance in 1765 towards the Stamp Act and other Parliamentary “incursions”. It provoked him to think about and act upon his principles, and it was the basis for his optimism, albeit qualified, for a truly “New World.” This confidence in the prospect for a virtuous Republic was based on two principal contentions. His *Dissertation on the Canon and Feudal Laws*<sup>15</sup> (and to a lesser but still significant extent, the *Novanglus Letters*)<sup>16</sup> show a strong sense of “conclusion”, the idea that the achievement of the republic would represent the culmination of a process. Further, supporting and contributing to this idea was the manifest, exceptional and contrasting (in relation to England) virtue of the people and the *de facto* “republican” nature of New England political institutions, which represented an important part of the Puritan culture.

The Imperial School’s interpretation of the Revolution emphasises this sense of inevitability and maturation.<sup>17</sup> Writing as “Novanglus” Adams counters the argument of his opponent “Massachusettensis” who pleads the filial duty of a child to its mother, by positing the corresponding and greater obligation of a “mother” to her “children.”<sup>18</sup> Indeed in the autumn of 1775 whilst serving in the Continental Congress he strove, with only partial success, to secure the exclusion of deferential addresses to England and subservient references to themselves on the part of the “Americans”. “By

---

<sup>14</sup> John Adams as “Governor Winthrop” January 26th 1767, *Papers*, 1:192.

<sup>15</sup> “Dissertation”, *Papers*, 1:106-128.

<sup>16</sup> Published in the *Boston Gazette. Works III*. A series of Letters in the *Boston Gazette*, in response to the Tory Propaganda of Daniel Leonard who wrote as *Massachusettensis*. At the time Adams believed the writer to be his friend, Tory Jonathan Sewall.

<sup>17</sup> Marc Engal, *A Mighty Empire: The Origins of the American Revolution* (Ithaca, 1988), pp.2-6; Theodore Draper, *The Struggle for Power* (Boston, 1996), pp.25-8.

<sup>18</sup> “Novanglus Letters”, *Works*, 3:41.

this time I mortally hated the Words ‘Province’ ‘Colonies’ and ‘Mother Country.’”<sup>19</sup> He declared himself a “High American”,<sup>20</sup> and as one of the first to countenance independence was infuriated with the reticence of Congress and accordingly opposed the 1775 “Olive Branch Petition.”<sup>21</sup>

He had already convinced himself with the arguments engendered by his study and understanding of political science. The “Coming of Age” arguments alluded to in *Novanglus* as part of the constitutional case for the break were, as such, applicable to colonists everywhere.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, insofar as these arguments were based on the rights of Englishmen, and in terms of self-determination, the prospect for a wider Revolution, embracing Canada and the West Indies was considered on several occasions, and seen by the revolutionaries as part of their mission as the people with whom liberty in the world survived or perished.<sup>23</sup>

The idea of a higher purpose or mission had deep roots in New England culture. The Mayflower Compact undertaken by earnest Pilgrims just off the shore of Massachusetts Bay in 1620 “covenanted and combined” them together into a “Civil Body Politic” for the Glory of God and “advancement of the Christian Faith.” The seeds of independence were, perhaps, as Adams insisted, sown with this initial migration. Certainly in New England the early settlers were Puritans, of an avowedly independent spirit, determined to found a Bible based Commonwealth in the wilderness, and achieve a virtuous existence impossible in England.<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> “Autobiography”, *Diary and Autobiography* 3:357; Letter: John Adams to William Woodfall, 14th May 1774, *Works*, 9:338.

<sup>20</sup> “Autobiography”, *Diary and Autobiography*, 3:357.

<sup>21</sup> 1775 “Diary”, *Diary and Autobiography*, 2:161.

<sup>22</sup> Merrill Jensen (ed.), “American Colonial Documents to 1776” *English Historical Documents*, 9:659-98 (London, 1969).

<sup>23</sup> “Notes of Debates in the Continental Congress,” in “Diary”, September 8th 1774, *Diary and Autobiography* 2:128-30.

<sup>24</sup> Marc Noll, *Christianity in the United States in Canada* (London, 1992), pp.38-40.

John Winthrop, whom Adams greatly admired,<sup>25</sup> had initiated the crusading tradition in his vision of the Greater American future:

...We shall find that the God of Israel is among us...when he shall make us a praise and a glory that men shall say of succeeding plantations, 'The Lord make it likely that of *New England*.' For we must consider that we shall be as a City upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us.<sup>26</sup>

The circumstances of this migration, the result of persecution, also add credence to Adams's view and helps explain the latent antagonism with the mother country.<sup>27</sup> Many years after the Revolution and independence, Adams retrospectively makes the point that Winthrop had anticipated eventual independence<sup>28</sup> (as had Richard Hakluyt many years earlier).<sup>29</sup> In 1771 Adams predicted that "500 years hence" the continent would be made up of "a great number of Empires, independent of Europe, and each other."<sup>30</sup>

However in 1765 he was also keen to stress the loyalty of the Province, and whilst he continued to champion the ideals of "these Colonies...[including the] love of liberty," which had "projected, conducted and accomplished the settlement of America,"<sup>31</sup> he disavowed the charge that their foundation had been implicitly anti-monarchist.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Adams's choice of "Governor Winthrop" as one of his many pseudonyms has already been noted.

<sup>26</sup> John Winthrop Snr., "A Model of Christian Charity" quoted: *The Faber Book of America*, Ricks and Vance (ed.) pp.156-7 (London, 1992).

<sup>27</sup> David Lovejoy, *The Glorious Revolution in America* (Hanover, New Hampshire, 1972), pp.1-20.

<sup>28</sup> Letter: John Adams to Benjamin Rush *Works* 9:597; Letter: John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, 29th May 1818 *Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 2:313.

<sup>29</sup> Edmund S. Morgan, *The Meaning of Independence: John Adams, George Washington, and Thomas Jefferson* (New York, 1978), p.3.

<sup>30</sup> "Diary" June 5th 1771, *Diary and Autobiography* 2:25. Notwithstanding the political and theological basis for the initial settlement, some five generations later, other factors, demographic developments and geographic reality, which affected all the colonies, would alter the basis of their relationship with England. In 1755 Benjamin Franklin predicted that by 1851 there would be more Englishmen on the West side of the Atlantic, others gave a date perhaps a generation before that time. (Draper, *The Struggle For Power*, pp.104-9; Bernard Bailyn, *The Faces of the Revolution* [New York, 1990], p.193).

<sup>31</sup> "Dissertation" (unpublished Draft, c. August 1765), *Papers*, 1:110.

<sup>32</sup> "Dissertation", *Papers*, 1:118.

He was indeed a reluctant revolutionary. In October 1775 he wrote to his wife of “the sad necessity”<sup>33</sup> of breaking the connection with Great Britain and later, reflecting upon events maintained that he had feared an “obstinate struggle” and that there was “no desire for independence...as long as Britain should leave our liberties inviolate.”<sup>34</sup> However, his idea of inevitability, based on his political and social heritage, rooted in the virtuous and pure origins of New England, drove him to republican and revolutionary conclusions.

In 1815 Adams wrote informing Dr. Morse of the important distinction between the Revolution, the Declaration of Independence, and the Revolutionary War, then as now confounded. He argued that in the 1760s there was a “Revolution” in the “views, opinions, and feelings of the American People.”<sup>35</sup> Events initiated in that decade (culminating in the 1770s) opened the people’s eyes “to a clear sight of the danger that threatened them, and their posterity, and the liberties of both, in all future generations.”<sup>36</sup> His motives for this enlightening statement are not completely impartial nor purely scholarly. It is part of his general assault on perceived historical misconceptions and romanticism. His chief aim in this case is to combat prevailing ignorance of the preceding Constitutional wrangles,<sup>37</sup> and, one suspects, deflect, as he does more explicitly elsewhere, attention and kudos from Jefferson and his *Declaration*. But his pedantry is also part of his attempt to place these events into the tradition through which he views and understands American social and political history, a pursuit initiated in the 1760s, and continued, for revisionist purposes, into retirement.

---

<sup>33</sup> Letter: John Adams to Abigail Adams, 7th October 1775, *Adams Family Correspondence*, 1:296.

<sup>34</sup> Letter: John Adams to Dr. Benjamin Rush, *Works*, 9:591.

<sup>35</sup> Letter: John Adams to H. Niles, 13th February 1818, *Works*, 10:282.

<sup>36</sup> Letter: John Adams to Dr. S. Morse, 29th November 1815, *Works*, 10:186

<sup>37</sup> Letter: John Adams to Benjamin Rush, *Works*, 9:597.

This statement, though made at the end of his career, is nevertheless indicative of his thought as it develops from 1765. When attempting to comprehend or explain a phenomenon, he felt more confident dealing with apparent inevitabilities and relished the identification of a pattern which might aid the prediction of future events in addition to facilitating the true understanding of the past. Viewing events as part of a wider historical process, his interpretation took on a quasi-religious dimension, involving concepts of providence and divine grace. Inevitability mixed with progress, liberty triumphing over tyranny, sacrifice and triumph, fitted his image of the New England drama of exile and victory over adversity with purity and the “universal love of liberty” forged through a mortal struggle.<sup>38</sup>

C.B. Thompson has sought to de-emphasise the role of Puritanism in Adams’s thought,<sup>39</sup> and in general terms to refute the claims of *de facto* republicanism. It is true that Adams lacked the religious fervency of his forebears, and whilst Thompson admits he “never kicked the Puritan Habit” he draws a distinction between, for instance, the pious introspection and self-admonition of early Puritan diaries and Adams’s more secular and rational tone.

Adams was certainly a product of his much more rational era, but was by no means anti-religious. He did not waver from his strict Protestantism, also recognising and supporting the valuable social function of organised religion and the importance of a moral code at the base of society.<sup>40</sup> Additionally his Puritan background is manifest not just in his habits, but also in a secular version of the Calvinistic view of

---

<sup>38</sup> Noll, *A History of Christianity America and Canada*, Chapter II; Noll explains and interprets the religious imagery of the Revolutionary era, through to the present day, especially the imagery of the struggle, good versus evil, and the images during the Revolution, the conflict viewed in terms of Christ versus the Anti-Christ, the virtuous New World versus the corrupt Old. The 20th century manifestations included the ideological crusade against the Soviet “Evil Empire”.

<sup>39</sup> C.B.Thompson, “Young John Adams and the New Philosophical Rationalism.” *William and Mary Quarterly* 2 vol. 55 (April 1998).

<sup>40</sup> “Thoughts on Government” (1775 and 1776), Draft of the “Massachusetts Constitution”, *Works IV*.

human nature. Indeed the emerging republican view of the time owes much to Puritan themes, with its demands for orthodoxy, the appropriate “plainness” and simplicity of manners, associated by some with creedal purity, part of another more intolerant New England trait.<sup>41</sup> The austerity and control demanded by civic virtue is comparable to a devout, secular, spirituality.

The New England Puritan influence, as I will attempt to demonstrate in the remainder of this chapter, was instrumental in Adams’s comprehension and contextualisation of the threats to the people’s freedoms, and his appraisal of the people, and of their exceptional virtue, forged in adversity and a steadfast “Republican spirit.”<sup>42</sup> This is to a certain extent denied by Hartz who de-emphasises the influence of a communitarian, anti-individualism of Puritan based native republicanism.<sup>43</sup> Certainly Virginia and other colonies outside New England had no myth of “Divine Origins.” They were founded on more individualistic and avaricious principles, according to de Tocqueville, by “gold-seekers, dubious men with no standards.”<sup>44</sup> They were altogether lacking in the Puritan family basis, the centrality of Church authority or developed local government.<sup>45</sup>

Adams’s Diary shows a New England, perhaps less theologically austere than one might assume, operating *ab inito* on undeclared republican principles,<sup>46</sup> and paying

---

<sup>41</sup> The Salem Witch Trials stand as testament to the hysterical possibilities.

<sup>42</sup> March 12th 1774 “Diary”, *Diary and Autobiography*, 2:93.

<sup>43</sup> Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America; An Interpretation of American Political Thought since the Revolution*, (New York, 1955), pp.6-10, 20-35.

<sup>44</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, J.P.Mayer (ed.) George Lawrence (Translator) (1994), p.34.

<sup>45</sup> cf. Patrice Higonnet, (*Sister Republics: The Origins of French and American Republicanism*, [Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1988], pp.11-12) who nevertheless claims that in their foundation all the colonies, requiring in their initial settlement and organisation collective endeavour and co-operation were “conceived in a more communitarian spirit” a spirit, though “transmuted over the years, continued to infuse American’s perception of their society and of its culture...”.

<sup>46</sup> Letter: John Adams to Daniel Wright, 13th March 1809, “My country [Massachusetts] and its government have been republican since its origin,...long before I was born.” *Works* 9:614.



mere lip service to royal authority.<sup>47</sup> He depicts the Pilgrims, enlightened, educated, in fear and in hope, determined to escape the tyranny of the Old World, founding both their civil and ecclesiastical “governments” on “wise, humane, and benevolent principles...in revelation and in reason,”<sup>48</sup> as a bulwark against the forces of oppression, ignorance and unyielding domination they had left behind.

As Breen puts it, “The traditions of New England were a central passion throughout Adams’s life and the key to understanding the continuity of his political thought.”<sup>49</sup> His New England partiality never left him,<sup>50</sup> and forms the bed-rock of his thought and his expectations of the country as a whole. His attachment was unashamed: he championed New England’s pure beginning, her politics, her morality and her people. He lists for Abigail the advantages that New England had over the other colonies, mentioning as chief among them, in addition to the well developed educational and political institutions, the fact the people were of purer English blood, less “infected” by Scottish, Irish, Dutch, or Swedish blood. They consisted, rather, of people who “left Europe in purer times than the present and less tainted by corruption than those they left behind them.”<sup>51</sup>

Much later in 1786, whilst in London, again indulging in New England pride, he describes her formative institutions and traditions, the “Scænes where New England men were formed...”:

Maj. Langbourne dined with Us again. He was lamenting the difference of character between Virginia and N. England. I offered to give him a receipt for making a New England in Virginia. He desired it and I recommended to him Town Meetings, Training Days, Town Schools, and Ministers, giving him a short explanation of each Article. The Meeting House, and Schoolhouse and [the] Training Field...The Virtues and Talents of the

<sup>47</sup> Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada*, p.38.

<sup>48</sup> “Dissertation” No.2, 19th August 1765 *Papers*, 1:115.

<sup>49</sup> Timothy H. Breen, “John Adams’ Fight Against Innovation in the New England Constitution 1776”, *New England Quarterly*, (4) vol. 40 (1967), p.503.

<sup>50</sup> “Diary”, 29th October 1775, *Diary and Autobiography*, p.318.

<sup>51</sup> Letter: John Adams to Abigail Adams, October 29th 1775, *Adams Family Correspondence*, 1:318-9.

People are there formed. Their Temperance, Patience, Fortitude, Prudence, and Justice, as well as their Sagacity, Knowledge, Judgement, Taste, Skill, Ingenuity, Dexterity, and Industry.<sup>52</sup>

His writings are therefore a reflection upon his own experience in New England, and although Higonnet stresses the wide-spread communal and practical suitability for republican government in America, including wide property ownership and a high degree of actual equality, it would appear that Adams's interpretation and position is not directly applicable to those colonies not founded for ostensibly religious purposes. Until the crisis of the 1770s, Adams had never left the Province, so it is natural that his early thought would reflect his own environment and personal history.<sup>53</sup> However, the pervasiveness of New England principles is such that, as de Tocqueville remarks, her "influence...extends beyond its limits and over the whole American world..."<sup>54</sup> and her role as the cradle of the Revolution ensures that regional partiality does not render his reflections or arguments inapplicable to an accurate comprehension of the Revolutionary period. Thus he could encapsulate the motives of the whole during the next decade, when, in 1769, specifically in reference to New England, he speaks of a New World people possessing the "tender feelings of humanity and the noble benevolence of Christians...[the] highest reverence for virtue...descended from a race of heroes..."<sup>55</sup>

---

<sup>52</sup> "Diary", July 21st 1786, *Diary and Autobiography* 3:195; "Dissertation", *Papers*, 1:120; Mark Noll, *A History of Christianity America and Canada* pp.44-5.

<sup>53</sup> Henry and Charles Francis Adams, "A Life of John Adams" *Works* 1:6; "Diary", *Works*, 2:245. See Appendix I: Genealogical Chart, "The Adams Family of Massachusetts".

<sup>54</sup> De Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p.36.

<sup>55</sup> "The Clarendon Letters", *Works* 3:476.

THE STAMP ACT, PART OF "...A DIRECT AND FORMAL DESIGN ON FOOT, TO ENSLAVE AMERICA...BY DEGREES"<sup>56</sup>

For Adams what had been secured in the New World was the antithesis of the Old. In Europe liberty and the love of freedom that is innate in all men had been extinguished through the forces of a civil-ecclesiastical junta. Adams's anti-Catholicism was well developed.<sup>58</sup> The dominion of Popery for him typified the tyranny wrought through superstition and theological dogmatism, rendering the minds of the uneducated masses into "a state of sordid ignorance and staring timidity."<sup>59</sup> Resistance to and liberation from the canon and feudal laws, the manifestation of the unholy alliance between the civil and ecclesiastical authorities, had been a cause of the liberation brought by the Reformation in Europe. In England the dominion of Rome was ended; however the "calamitous" and "wicked confederacy" between the established Church and the "encroaching, grasping restless and ungovernable power" of the civil authority remained.<sup>60</sup> That the Reformation was incomplete, at length caused the Puritans to "fly to the wilderness for refuge", complete with their principles and ideals.<sup>61</sup>

[The Puritans] had an utter contempt of all the dark ribaldry of hereditary indefeasible right - the lords anointed, and the divine, miraculous original of government, with which the priesthood has enveloped the feudal monarch in clouds and mystery...<sup>62</sup>

<sup>56</sup> "Dissertation", Part 4, Monday, 21st October 1765, *Papers*, 1:127-28; Letter: John Adams to John Avery Jr., 21st March 1777, "Whoever has attended to the policy of the British Court...from the year 1761, must have seen...evidence of a fixed design to subjugate America to the complete domination of Parliament..." *Works* 6:435.

<sup>57</sup> "Dissertation", Part 4, Monday, 21st October 1765, *Papers*, 1:127.

<sup>58</sup> He rails against Catholic doctrines, such as transubstantiation, in his Diary ("Diary", 16th February 1756, *Diary and Autobiography* 1:7, 28) and later to Jefferson he ponders whether a Catholic country can ever enjoy liberty as America does. (Letter: John Adams to Thomas Jefferson; 19th May 1812, *Works*, 10:398).

<sup>59</sup> "Dissertation" Part 1, 12th August 1765 *Papers* 1:112.

<sup>60</sup> *Loc. cit.*

<sup>61</sup> *Loc. cit.*

<sup>62</sup> "Dissertation," No. 2 19th August 1765, *Papers* 1:117.

Thus consisted the principles of good, equitable, orderly government, and a suspicious and principled opposition to any act or tendency that were indicative of the old feudal tyranny. This was a characteristic which was sensitive to the most inconsequential evocation, and which would become a key aspect of the republican dogma.<sup>63</sup>

It was within this context that Adams's *Dissertation on the Canon and Feudal Law* was written, completed whilst "very much alone in the office", his wife being confined to her chamber after "presenting" him with a daughter.<sup>64</sup> In a fashion that was to become part of the Adams style he dismisses his work as an inconsequential "bagatelle",<sup>65</sup> while at other times credits his production with arousing the province to the danger of the Stamp Act. Whilst this latter claim is probably overstated, the *Dissertation* was widely read during the "epocha of the Stamp Act,"<sup>66</sup> and certainly played a role in engendering opposition.

The Stamp Act<sup>67</sup> was one of many parliamentary measures that inflamed the passions of the colonists and raised again the issue of Parliamentary power against the prerogatives of the colonial assemblies. This particular measure required payment for a stamp on newspapers, legal papers, pamphlets and even playing cards. Opponents protested that, as an internal tax, it was against "the Constitution" and contrary, even, to the *Magna Carta*.<sup>68</sup> It was repealed the following year, but since Parliament still reserved the right to levy a similar (that is *internal*) tax,<sup>69</sup> the fundamental issues were

<sup>63</sup> "Dissertation," No. 2 19th August 1765, *Papers* 1:117-8.

<sup>64</sup> "Autobiography", *Diary and Autobiography*, 3:284.

<sup>65</sup> Letter: John Adams to Dr. S. Morse, 29th November 1815, *Works*, 10:589.

<sup>66</sup> "Autobiography", *Diary and Autobiography*, 3:282.

<sup>67</sup> Stamp Act: 1765. (5 George III).

<sup>68</sup> George Peek, *The Political Writings of John Adams: A Representative Selection* (New York, 1954), p.67.

<sup>69</sup> The Declaratory Act (1766).

not resolved, and the Tea Act (1773) with other measures became the precipitating forces for the Revolution, in real terms begun at least a decade before.

The *Dissertation* served as a means of education, and an index of oppression, by placing this particular piece of legislation in the context of the history of New England.<sup>70</sup> Adams portrayed it quite convincingly as a contemporary manifestation of the old feudal oppression, the cause of past struggle, in an attempt to equate the survival of the heritage of liberty in the New World with opposition to this Act:

We should think ourselves guilty of a great Impiety to the memory of our forefathers, of cruel inhumanity to ourselves, nay We should dishonour the name and character of British Subjects, in which we glory, and should even blush before our fellow subjects within Great Britain if we tamely and silently saw our rights and liberties wrested from us.<sup>71</sup>

In a sense the battle lines of the Revolution were thereby established, the Tories acknowledging the validity of the wider imperial reform, and confirming England's authority over her North American possessions, and the Whigs exercised in their constitutional arguments and challenges. Aside from the materialistic objections to any tax, which for political reasons will be portrayed as onerous and objectionable (as it was by Whigs and Tories alike)<sup>72</sup> the character of the opposition was two-fold: emotional and constitutional. Whilst the latter provokes the former the differentiation is useful. Adams's *Dissertation* reflects the more emotional view, whereas his *Instructions to the Braintree Representatives*<sup>73</sup> rests upon constitutional arguments, reflecting well the legalistic approach he would later adopt and also the importance of this constitutional aspect of the Puritan heritage.

---

<sup>70</sup> One of the other titles he considered for the Essay was "Essay upon Forefathers Rock."

<sup>71</sup> "Instructions to Braintree's Representative, Concerning the Stamp Act", 24th September 1765, *Papers*, 1:136; "Dissertation", *Works*, 3:463.

<sup>72</sup> Bailyn, *Ideological Origins*, p.29-30.

<sup>73</sup> *Works*, 3:456.

Adams's equation of the Act with the fragility of freedom raised and confirmed widely held fears. This equation was not entirely unwarranted: the perceived attack on the New England way of life seemed to be part of a plot to render the people susceptible to tyranny by reducing them to ignorance (by taxing papers and literature), subjecting them to near feudal serfdom, creating great inequalities thereby destroying their virtue, and reducing them to dependence (by impoverishing them).<sup>74</sup> That the period had also seen the establishment of the Roman Catholic religion in Quebec<sup>75</sup> intensified this apprehension and turned attention to the potential power of Parliament: "If Parliament could do this in Canada, it can do the same in all the other colonies..."<sup>76</sup>

The levying of an internal tax, against all recent custom, was a point of considerable challenge, given that the colonists had no representation in that Parliament. Again the spectre of Parliamentary tyranny was prominent: "the cry was", explained Adams some fifty years later, "if Parliament can tax us, we are undone for ever, in soul, body, and estate".<sup>77</sup> With this serious threat to private property came the challenge that "Parliament [had] no authority over them in any case, whatsoever".<sup>78</sup>

The controversy highlighted the imprecise demarcation of the colonial position and jurisdiction, *vis-à-vis* Parliament, and provoked in Adams a keen interest in matters of political theory, colonial status, the just framing of government and the nature and political traditions of New England. According to Wood, from 1755 American Whigs had been concerned about the underlying motives of the Imperial

---

<sup>74</sup> "Dissertation", *Papers*, 1:106-128.

<sup>75</sup> The Quebec Act 1774.

<sup>76</sup> Letter: John Adams to Dr. S. Morse, 29th November 1815, *Works* 10:186.

<sup>77</sup> *Loc. cit.*

<sup>78</sup> *Loc. cit.* Morgan, *The Meaning of Independence*, p11-14.

Government,<sup>79</sup> and by 1765 Adams was convinced that there was an “ardent and formal design to suppress them”. Wood suggests that the spectre of tyranny became something of an obsession, and that signs of it were seen everywhere, a condition exacerbated by the isolation of the colonies. Adams’s own efforts in the *Dissertation* tend to confirm this as they were intended to “highlight” this “danger”. The receptivity of the colonies, especially New England, to a hysterical reaction to rumours of a “plot” was based on their past and principally the political theory which developed from their religious dogma and shared experiences.

Rumours of a concerted plot were believable and easily accepted in the light of the patterns of past tyranny that obsessed Adams no more than others.<sup>80</sup> This was constantly confirmed by rumours and specific Acts, construed by their opponents as part of a conspiracy, continuing into the 1770s. Adams sets out the elements of this conspiracy claiming “that it has been much longer in contemplation than is generally known...”.<sup>81</sup> He saw it as being instigated not from Great Britain initially, but as in 1765 by a Tory junto, misinforming the home administration and thereby achieving their own ends and consolidating their power.<sup>82</sup>

The receptivity of the Puritan mind to such plots was developed to a high degree, coming from a principal tenet of the Puritan political theory, which was their fear of power and the ramifications of un-subdued human passions. This fear, and their institutional remedies for the problem, played a key part in the formation of the Whig critique of British society and government policy from the 1760s. The nature of existing New England institutions reflected a belief in the need for institutional

<sup>79</sup> Wood, “Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style: Causality and Deceit in the Eighteenth Century”, *William and Mary Quarterly* 3rd series, 39 (1982), pp.402-403; Bailyn, *Ideological Origins* pp.94-100, 144-159.

<sup>80</sup> James M. Farrell, “New England’s Cicero: John Adams and the Rhetoric of Conspiracy”, *Proceeding of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, vol. 104, (1992), p.55.

<sup>81</sup> “Novanglus”, *Works* 4:13.

balance as a bulwark against human nature and as a force to regulate the conflict between passion and reason.<sup>83</sup> Adams's interpretation of the Puritan view, which concluded his initial thoughts, was that just as church government was established by them in accordance with the scriptures, civil government was founded in accordance with the "dignity of human nature",<sup>84</sup> that is as "a frame, a scheme, a system, a combination of powers for a certain end, namely the good of the whole community,"<sup>85</sup> resting on consent. Puritan institutions were highly democratic, in theory, and the power given by the people to their agents was revocable:

Rulers are no more than attorney's. Agents and trustees for the people, and if the cause, the interests and trust is insidiously betrayed or wantonly trifled away, the people have the right to revoke the authority that they themselves had deputed, and to constitute abler and better agents, attorney's and trustees.<sup>86</sup>

The Puritan intention, in fleeing oppression, was to frame all their institutions in a way which would preclude corruption by regulating the passion that motivated it. The explanation for the apparent "design" and "plot" to undermine liberty in the colonies was based on a diagnosis of British corruption and an implicit view of an alternative. There are certain parallels between this and the antecedents of the American Whig view (explained by Bailyn) which lay in the "Country" opposition ideology which had developed in reaction to the corruption of "Court" politics in the 1720s.<sup>87</sup> The later American manifestation used many of the same themes, and writers of the earlier period were very influential in giving expression to these later grievances, providing the vocabulary for opposition pamphlets.<sup>88</sup> This view, subscribed to by Adams, saw

---

<sup>82</sup> "Novanglus", *Works* 4:16.

<sup>83</sup> Howe, *The Changing Thought of John Adams* (Princeton, 1966), pp. 10-15.

<sup>84</sup> "Dissertation" No.2, 19th August 1765, *Papers*, 1:116.

<sup>85</sup> "Instructions to the Braintree Representatives" *Works* 3:456.

<sup>86</sup> "Dissertation", No.3, 30th September 1765, *Papers*, 1:121.

<sup>87</sup> Bailyn, *Ideological Origins*, pp.94-100; Wood, *Creation of the American Republic*, pp.35-38; Letter: John Adams to Joseph Hawley, August 1774, *Papers*, 2:135.

<sup>88</sup> Bailyn, *Ideological Origins*, p.95



England as morally and financially corrupt, decadent and without virtue. The educated colonists were well versed in the classics and knew from them the signs of an Empire in decline.<sup>89</sup> They saw evidence of it everywhere. Adams's perception of the origin of the New World and the present crisis meant that, according to his understanding of the rise and fall of Empires, a new power would rise to take Britain's place. That this would be America, Adams was in no doubt; as the culmination of the process it was inevitable. The "seat of Empire" had been transferred with the first settlers, who, in themselves had constituted the "choice grain",<sup>90</sup> selected by God to do his work and found a new virtuous Empire, representing the true guardians of English liberty.

The evidence of corruption at home, and its effects in the colonies, contributed to the logic of rebellion: a separation was perhaps necessary to avoid an infection. In 1775 Adams considered with regret that "the cancer is too deeply rooted and too far spread to be cured by anything short of cutting it out."<sup>91</sup> The organic analogy of an encroaching, cancer-like spread of corrupt power throughout the British Constitution was a common theme.<sup>92</sup> With every British action which confirmed the dire prognosis between 1765 and 1773, the self-analysis of contrasting American virtue grew in substance, and developed into a coherent argument for revolution based on an imperative of self-preservation which entailed a view of a republican alternative. This republican alternative was the form of government deemed best suited to the American character.

---

<sup>89</sup> Bailyn, *Ideological Origins*, pp.95-7

<sup>90</sup> Howe, *The Changing Thought of John Adams*, p.15; "Diary", June 5th 1771, *Diary and Autobiography*, 2:25.

<sup>91</sup> Letter: John Adams to Moses Gill, 10th June, 1775 *Works*, 9:359

<sup>92</sup> Bailyn, *Ideological Origins*, pp.94-115.

The austere demands of republicanism in many respects showed the influences of a secularised Puritanical civic morality, with exacting requirements of character. It required of men a passion for the common good, something which human experience seemed to dictate was unrealistic in all but the most remarkable people. The passion for power, a disposition which was present in the fabric of the soul, would have to be regulated, and balanced with reason.<sup>93</sup>

John Howe emphasises Adams's early optimism beyond reality, I think the more to emphasise his later change and the depth of disillusionment. Adams was too much the Puritan to place too much faith in the goodness of man, and therefore opposed the ideas of Paine which would support a single, unchecked government assembly. From the beginning of his interest in political theory he is convinced of the importance of balanced institutions, to check the passions of men, and help foster virtuous citizenship.

His firm belief in New England exceptionalism, as I have shown, was projected to encompass the whole country, although his unfamiliarity with the other colonies did contribute to doubts. Virtue for him was demonstrated in frugality, industry and the positive passion for the common good,<sup>94</sup> and he was encouraged by the apparent attachment to these virtues demonstrated during the early years of the war. The conflict demanded huge self-sacrifice, frugality and selfless patriotism. His was a mix of Puritan pessimism and New World optimism, a conviction that the environment and social condition of men would shape their characters, that education and opportunity for expression would develop disciplined reason to balance the passion. The environment seemed suited to a republican people, with wide property ownership, the absence of large-scale dependence, and the relatively egalitarian

---

<sup>93</sup> "Dissertation" No.3, 30th September 1765, *Papers*, 1:118.

nature of society. He was hopeful for the republican future because he believed that the afflictions of Europe could be avoided. Characteristic of his thought at this time, for example, was that he viewed the aristocratic nature of the Old World as an artificial imposition on the nature of the people, and he ponders how the “aristocracy may be prevented from occurring.”<sup>95</sup>

Tories like Galloway viewed the Revolutionary movement and opposition to it in class terms, and warned that the actions of the Patriots would unleash class-based hatred and violence. Adams shared this concern, and feared the long-term effect that the challenge to and disrespect for authority would have on the virtue of the citizens. During the early years of the campaign, however, he wrote in praise of the steadfast patriotism of the people, and was encouraged by the moderation of the people in most cases, in New England and in the country a whole.<sup>96</sup>

Events, certainly in the short-term, refuted Galloway’s fears, but the Tories also expressed their position in terms of the constitutional arguments which had initiated the present challenge to British authority. The arguments which Adams develops have their focus in his province, but the principles of self-determination, and the defence of the privileges of the colonial assemblies were applicable and important to all, not just confined to New England sensibilities.

---

<sup>94</sup> Howe, *The Changing Thought of John Adams*, pp.31-2.

<sup>95</sup> Letter: John Adams to Count Sarsfield, January 31st 1785, *Works* 8:370. A rather insensitive letter given the appellation of the recipient.

<sup>96</sup> John Adams to James Warren, 22nd December 1773, *Works* 9:335, 9th April 1774, *Works*, 9:336; 25th June 1774, *Works* 9:339; John Howe, *The Changing Thought of John Adams*, pp.29-32.

“...THE BROTHERLY SYMPATHY OF ALL THE COLONIES...”<sup>97</sup>

The nature and jurisdiction of the Stamp Act meant that it affected all of the colonies, not just one particular region. As a result, the arguments against it developed in a similar fashion. A concerted opposition was possible: New England town meetings proclaimed their “British privileges”,<sup>98</sup> whilst the Virginian House of Burgesses appealed to British self-interest and the right of consent to taxation.<sup>99</sup> From this point a sense of a national identity was further developed, so that in the Continental Congress a decade later, Patrick Henry could declare “I am not a Virginian, but an American”.<sup>100</sup>

In his Autobiography Adams explains, “I had read Harrington, Sydney, Hobbes, Nedham and Locke, but with little Application to any particular views: till these Debates in [the Continental] Congress...”, and attributes to these debates the impetus for his later writings on government. Lockean appeals to natural rights, to the principle of consent to taxation, broken social contracts and the right to resistance figure prominently in reaction to the Stamp Act, and later, as shown by Adams’s, account, in the Debates of the Continental Congress during which their natural rights *and* their rights as Englishmen were invoked.

In a series of letters in the Press<sup>101</sup> Adams opposed the case for submission to the authority of Parliament called for by the Tories who argued that as part of the realm of England they were subject to the supreme authority of Parliament. In the course of his

<sup>97</sup> “Novanglus” Works 3:34. Pertaining to the reaction to the Boston massacre of 1770 which took place in the eventually re-named King Street: “such was the brotherly sympathy of all the colonies, such was the resentment against a hostile administration....”.

<sup>98</sup> Petition from the Massachusetts Legislature to the House of Commons, 3rd November 1764, “American Colonial Documents to 1776”, *English Historical Documents*, 9:665.

<sup>99</sup> The Virginia House of Burgesses, 20th May 1765: “American Colonial Documents to 1776”, 9:669.

<sup>100</sup> “The Debates in the Congress”, *Diary and Autobiography*, 2:125-9.

<sup>101</sup> The “Novanglus” letters: “Address to the Inhabitants of Massachusetts Bay” put the Whig Constitutional case in opposition to “Massachusettensis”. December 1774-April 1775, *Works* 3, *Papers* 2.

argument against this principle Adams develops an interpretation of the British Constitution and of the constitutional position of the colonies, which evolves into an argument diminishing the idea of any link or filial obligation.<sup>102</sup> He envisages retrospectively an original contract with the King by which the colonists put themselves under his protection, and from which they were now releasing themselves.<sup>103</sup>

Adams rejected the claim that Parliament was supreme in all matters, a claim which "Massachusettensis" had made in conjunction with his stated admiration for the balance of the British Constitution. The jurisdiction of Parliament, he believed, extended only across the Atlantic to the low water-mark. He cited precedents which defined Parliamentary authority over external matters and left to the colonists the regulation of their internal affairs, including taxation, where legislation could be enacted through their own institutions.<sup>104</sup>

Novanglus held that the Empire was a commonwealth of independent states cemented by a common allegiance to the King with the several states regulating their internal affairs and the British Parliament deciding external, imperial matters.<sup>105</sup> Since there cannot be two supreme authorities with the same jurisdiction, the division between internal and external matters is valid and constitutionally acceptable, for the representative assemblies ensure that consent is given to laws that affect the lives of the colonists directly. Parliament has no authority over them because they have no part in it. As transplanted Englishmen, living in communities which have no Parliamentary genesis, their consent and allegiance is to the King only, who is King of

---

<sup>102</sup> "Novanglus", *Papers*, 2:320-35. The arguments of the conservatively inclined for reconciliation were strong. Many Tories like Galloway declared themselves "friends of liberty" and opposed the Acts as iniquitous. Galloway was in favour of reconciliation with an accommodation for the future consisting of a British American Legislature, with two classes of laws, with consent required for both.

<sup>103</sup> "Novanglus", *Papers*, 2:346-50.

Massachusetts, of Rhode Island and Virginia etc., which are individual Realms, and he forms the apex of the constitutional balance in each, the other two components of the tripartite balance being formed by native assemblies. This Adams sees as the true nature of the British Constitution under which the colonists *chose* to place themselves. As it stood, the British Parliament consisted only of elected representatives and Lords from Great Britain, and it therefore had limited jurisdiction:<sup>106</sup>

[The colonies are]...not parcel of the realm, State, Kingdom, Government or Empire or land of England or Great Britain, in any sense which can make it subject universally to the supreme legislature of that Island.<sup>107</sup>

Adams continues to protest his loyalty to the King "Whom God Preserve",<sup>108</sup> and states his willingness for accommodation, thus expressing his view of the Empire (a term he finds emotionally charged and practically imprecise),<sup>109</sup> which he sees as having always been based upon consent. The original colonists when they sailed to the New World *chose* to place themselves under the authority and protection of the King. Their origins were not in "annexation or conquest",<sup>110</sup> the only laws they were bound by were the laws of nature, and they exercised their free choice in establishing the British form of constitution and swearing allegiance to the King. It was conferred authority, consented to freely, which could be revoked if the obligations of either party were not fulfilled.

He maintains at this time, as he with others like Edmund Burke claimed later, that far from being revolutionaries the colonists were attempting to preserve the British

---

<sup>104</sup> "Novanglus", *Papers*, 2:363-70.

<sup>105</sup> "Novanglus", *Papers*, 2:321-9.

<sup>106</sup> "Novanglus", *Papers*, 2:320, 373-77.

<sup>107</sup> "Novanglus", *Papers*, 2:367-70.

<sup>108</sup> "Novanglus", *Papers*, 2:367-70.

<sup>109</sup> "Novanglus", *Papers*, 2:250-1.

<sup>110</sup> "Novanglus", *Papers*, 2:329-37.

Constitution from the recent innovation, and that with them lay the fate of the Englishman's liberties. He suggests ways of reform; if the Colonies were to be treated as part of the English Realm, then such reform would be needed. Adams speculates as to how many MPs and Lords the demographics of America would require to be present in the Houses of Parliament.<sup>111</sup> Much of this is hyperbole, as elsewhere he states that actual representation would be impractical;<sup>112</sup> but he continues the theme.<sup>113</sup>

By this time Adams was sceptical that any accommodation could be reached with a clearly corrupt administration. Once the first shots at Lexington had been fired, signifying that the colonies were no longer under the protection of the King, he believed that the allegiance once owed was due no longer and the colonists were free to exercise their right to choose their own governments.<sup>114</sup> These actions, and the subsequent British bombardment of American towns, amounted to a declaration of independence in themselves.

Once converted, Adams was a steadfast patriot: once a habitual tea drinker, he converted to and learnt to tolerate coffee for patriotic reasons.<sup>115</sup> Throughout, the logic of his arguments, as expressed in the *Canon and Feudal Laws*, his draft instructions to the *Representatives of Braintree*, and his correspondence battles in the newspapers determined his response to British action and his support for independence. The views he expressed were within the Whig mainstream and his

---

<sup>111</sup> He calculates that, if "Massachusettensis" is right in asserting that the colonies form a part of the Realm of England, then America is entitled to send 250 MP's to Parliament, or indeed, "the haughty members from Great Britain must humble themselves...to cross the Atlantic and hold the Parliament in America" "Novanglus" *Papers*, 2:322.

<sup>112</sup> "Novanglus" *Papers*, 2:322.

<sup>113</sup> As a last ditch attempt to secure a reconciliation King George offered to create a batch of American Peers. For a survey of earlier ideas for the improvement of the administrative relationship between Great Britain and the Colonies see: Robert M Calhoun, "William Smith Jr.'s Alternative to the American Revolution", *New England Quarterly* vol. 41 (1968).

<sup>114</sup> John Howe, *The Changing Thought of John Adams*, pp.6-7.

<sup>115</sup> "Diary" *passim*, post 1774 *Diary and Autobiography* 2.

arguments persuasive, detailed, and in the main focused, with a scholarly and legalistic approach. His hope for the future is based on a faith in American exceptionalism which is derived directly from his New England background, within which he sees the prospect of a virtuous republic, as the mission of the Puritan settlers coming to fruition.



## CHAPTER III

*The Fall: The Disillusionment of John Adams*

We have no idea, no conception, no imagination no dream, of the Passions and Principles, which support Republics. What will become of us? God Knows.<sup>1</sup>

On various occasions John Adams vowed, to his wife and to himself, that he would avoid further entanglement in politics and remain with his family, on his farm. However, from 1774 upon his election as Massachusetts's delegate to the Continental Congress, he was constantly involved in local, national, and international politics. He undertook service in the Dutch Republic and France negotiating loans for America and securing treaties of commerce. He served as America's first Minister to England (1785-1788), on his return was elected Vice President, and retired, defeated, as President in 1800.

His public service was reluctant but committed. His early posts, and the attendant personal cost, to his finances and family life, he saw as part of an appropriate, virtuous, sacrifice; his duty in lieu of actual military service.<sup>2</sup> Increasingly melancholy due to the long separation from her husband, Abigail Adams referred to herself as a "widow", and bought land in Vermont in a vain attempt to entice her husband away from Boston political life, to be a frontier farmer.<sup>3</sup>

He was driven in his service by his wish to serve his country's interests, though considerations of fame and "reputation", something which he had always craved, were never absent from the calculations.<sup>4</sup> His *Thoughts on Government* are part of his wish to serve that interest, and were influential in the formation of a number of the State constitutions after independence. The political theory expressed in his *Thoughts*

---

<sup>1</sup> Letter: John Adams to an unknown correspondent: *Papers*, 5:163.

<sup>2</sup> John Ferling, *John Adams* (New York, 1966), p.234.

<sup>3</sup> Ferling, *John Adams*, p.232.

is reflected in his Draft Constitution for Massachusetts, and it was these principles which he defended in his *Defence of the Constitutions*.

Each treatise is a reaction to events, each represents a development in his thought and addresses specific political problems, his objective being to secure the principles of the Revolution. The reputation he acquired, which endures to this day, is founded on the incongruity of his later works - *Defence of the Constitutions of the United States*, (October 1786-December 1787), *Discourse on Davila* (1790), and his alleged opinions - with his earlier works - the *Dissertation*, *Novanglus*, *Thoughts on Government* - and with his devotion to the American cause in general. The cause of this supposed change during the 1780s, by which he seemed to lose his "republican moorings", is attributed to the time he spent amongst the royal courts of Europe. Indeed Adams admits the effect that this experience had on his thought; his opinions regarding the nature of man and of government. However the extent of this change has been over-stated. John Howe's description of a "sea change" perhaps does not accommodate adequately the areas of continuity which do exist throughout his writings,<sup>5</sup> though obscured by his style and the sheer volume of writing. His objectives remained the same as those of 1775, and indeed of 1765.<sup>6</sup>

The methodology he developed during the Stamp Act crisis was further developed, rather than "changed": the logic of his arguments propelled him onwards. The pattern of his thought, his stated objectives,<sup>7</sup> his study of the "divine science of

---

<sup>4</sup> Edmund S. Morgan, *The Meaning of Independence* (New York, 1978), pp.9-11.

<sup>5</sup> John Howe, *The Changing Political Thought of John Adams* (Princeton, 1966), Chapter: "Sea Change" *passim*. Cf. Richard A. Ryerson "Like a Hare before the Hunters': John Adams and the Idea of Republican Monarchy" *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, vol. 107 (1995), who demonstrates the continuity obscured by his impolitic use of politically taboo terms.

<sup>6</sup> Letter: John Adams to Dr. Benjamin Rush, 18th April 1790, "I deny any attachment to Monarchy and deny that have changed by principles since 1776." *Works*, 9:566.

<sup>7</sup>"Diary", December 5th 1758, *Diary and Autobiography*, 1:61; A.D.Morse, "The Politics of John Adams" *American Historical Review*, 1, vol. 4 (1899), p.311.

politics....the science of human happiness,"<sup>8</sup> his quest for the form of government suited to the character of the people and able to secure their essential liberties remained a constant. Within the course of his developing thought, eschewing as best he could superstition and ideological zealotry, he tackled the fundamental assumptions of his people. What was America, and in what sense was it a New World? Did the Revolution, as Jefferson and others supposed, represent a break with the forces and forms of the Old World? What was inevitable, and what was exceptional in America? These questions exercised Adams's mind, while his conclusions exercised those of others, both in opposition and in misplaced agreement. At base he was attempting to ascertain how the republican *ideal*, by his definition "an Empire of Laws, not of Men", was possible or sustainable in America or anywhere else.<sup>9</sup>

### QUALIFIED FAITH IN A PURELY INSTITUTIONAL BALANCE

His belief in American exceptionalism was expressed in relative terms; that is, whilst it was not guaranteed, America had a better chance than any other country to achieve and maintain republican virtue.<sup>10</sup> In retrospect Adams saw the late 1770s as a period in which the "pure" disinterested civic virtue of the 1760s declined, and corruption "entered in". His subsequent political thought became increasingly pessimistic as he developed an ever deepening critique of American society and of the corruption of her youthful virtue.

<sup>8</sup> "Thoughts on Government" (1776) *Works*, 3:193.

<sup>9</sup> "Thoughts on Government" (1776) *Works*, 3:194; "Defence of the Constitutions" [I], *Works*, 3:407.

<sup>10</sup> Letter: John Adams to Mercy Otis Warren, "The Adams-Warren Letters", *Proceeding of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, vol. 72 (1917), p.98.

On July 3rd 1776 John Adams wrote to his wife of his hopes and fears for the future, their people and their republican ideals,<sup>11</sup> which he submits “to an overruling Providence,” in which he firmly believes, despite the “unfashionable” nature of faith.<sup>12</sup> He was not naïve in his optimism. Whilst his Revolutionary career thus far had been driven by arguments based on Providence, history and a sense of duty to his forebears,<sup>13</sup> this same heritage and understanding also furnished Adams with a sense of political realism, particularly concerning the nature of man. This involved a suspicion of power and a firm belief in the importance of institutional regulation of the human passions.

He was as optimistic as a man of Puritan background can be. His Puritan forebears knew that time would be destructive to their virtuous Commonwealth,<sup>14</sup> and similarly Adams understood the fragility of the virtue requisite for a republican society. Despite these temporal fears, in the short term Adams was hopeful that the War itself would cleanse the people, that this last trial would render them virtuous enough to found a republican society, which would be capable of self-regeneration.<sup>15</sup>

It may be the will of Heaven that America shall suffer calamities still more wasting, and distresses yet more dreadful. If this is to be the case, it will have this good effect at least. It will inspire us with many virtues,...and correct many errors, follies and vices which threaten to disturb, dishonour and destroy us. The furnace of affliction produces refinements in states as well as individuals. And the new Governments we are assuming in every part will require a purification from our vices, and an augmentation of our virtues or they will be no blessings.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Letter: John Adams to Abigail Adams, 3rd July 1776, *Works*, 9:418.

<sup>12</sup> *Loc cit*.

<sup>13</sup> John Adams, Early Draft of the “Dissertation on the Canon and Feudal Law”, *Papers*, 1:108; John Adams, “Instructions to Braintree’s Representative, Concerning the Stamp Act”, 24th September 1765, *Papers*, 1:136; T.H.Breen, “John Adams’ Fight Against Innovation in the New England Constitution 1776” *New England Quarterly* 40 (1967), pp.501-506.

<sup>14</sup> Mark Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada*, (London, 1992), pp.41-47; Merle Curti *Human Nature in American Thought* (Madison, Wisconsin, 1980), pp.44-69.

<sup>15</sup> Gordon Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic* (Chapel Hill, 1969, 1998), pp.47-49; Bernard Bailyn, in *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (3rd ed., Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1992), discusses how the Revolution was needed to preserve the New World virtue from infection from the corruption of Great Britain. “Logic of Rebellion” pp.95-143.

<sup>16</sup> Letter: John Adams to Abigail Adams, 3rd July 1776, *Works* 9:418.

Adams's New England background had determined his reaction to British actions, his support for the Revolution, and his optimistic support for the republican alternative to monarchy. In 1765 his retrospective interpretation of the New England character was one of republican virtue and enlightenment.<sup>17</sup> The austere demands of republicanism, the necessary patriotism and commitment to the common good seemed to Adams attainable, at least in providentially blessed New England.<sup>18</sup>

From 1775 there was much speculation on the best form of government, and on the need for a new colonial constitutions as part of the transition from "monarchical government" to independent republics.<sup>19</sup> Opinions varied; some advocated a strong executive, decried the "vicious levelling spirit", and spoke of the inevitability of monarchy, and others of the need to keep power close to the people.<sup>20</sup> These diverse conclusions resulted from different views of the Revolutionary struggle, its causes and its aims. Adams's view of the struggle was at one with his political theory. To such debates Adams brought his own view, his interpretation of the New England "virtuous institutions", as a bulwark against tyranny based on the checks and balances of a de Lolmian view of the British Constitution. Accordingly, he held a qualified optimism regarding the character of the people and hoped that the requisite civic virtue could be engendered and protected by adequate institutional safeguards.<sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> "Dissertation", *Papers*, 1:106-128.

<sup>18</sup> The Puritan heritage of "Mission" and a faith in their being a "chosen" people, extended beyond the bounds of New England. Adams's New England pride, a key factor in his opposition to Parliamentary "tyranny" is expressed in his *Dissertation* (see chapter II). In early drafts he makes more of the supposed "providential beginnings". *Papers*, 1:108-9.

<sup>19</sup> Charles Francis Adams, editorial annotation, *Works*, 4:186.

<sup>20</sup> Merrill Jensen, *The Revolution Within America* (New York, 1974), pp.32-34.

<sup>21</sup> "Thoughts on Government", 1775 and 1776, *Works* 4.

In this time of highly charged innovative spirit Adams was a man of old world sensibilities.<sup>22</sup> In November 1775 he wrote to Richard Henry Lee, “taking nature and experience for [his] guide”, setting out a short sketch of the government structure he advocated. He unequivocally presents a near-English system of institutional balance which for him was the “*unum necessarium* of liberty, safety and good order”,<sup>23</sup> ensuring an “empire of laws and not of men”<sup>24</sup>. Turgot,<sup>25</sup> and other French *philosophes* and American radicals, criticised this emulation of the British form; however Adams is at pains to emphasise that the model is based on “the best political science”, and represents the New England models as much as the Old, identifying the great English theorists of the seventeenth century as part of New England heritage.<sup>26</sup> In short the division of powers and checks best secured liberty by ensuring the “impartial and exact execution of the laws.”<sup>27</sup>

Adams considered the arguments for constitutional balance of institutions to be self-evident, and this “dogma of balance” is the truly dominant feature of all his thought for the rest of his life.<sup>28</sup> His case against simple, and in favour of mixed, complex government had a two-fold basis: efficiency and the need to control power. He describes to George Wythe of Virginia and to John Penn of North Carolina, to whom he writes in 1776, the need for separation between the Executive and the Legislative branch, and for a division also within the latter. Whilst the popular branch is essential to liberty<sup>29</sup>, it is unsuited to an executive role, which requires “secrecy

---

<sup>22</sup> Stephen Kurtz, “The Political Science of John Adams: A Guide to his Statecraft”, *William and Mary Quarterly* vol.25 (1968).

<sup>23</sup> Letter: John Adams to Philip Mazzel, 12th June 1787, *Works* 9:553.

<sup>24</sup> “Thoughts” (1776), *Works*, 4:194.

<sup>25</sup> Letter: Anne Turgot to Richard Price, 22nd March 1778, *Works* 4:279. Anne Robert Jacques Turgot (1727-1781), was a French statesman, economist, and political writer.

<sup>26</sup> “Defence” [III], *Works*, 6:3.

<sup>27</sup> “Thoughts” (1776), *Works*, 4:194.

<sup>28</sup> Elkins and McKittrick, *The Age of Federalism* (New York, 1994), p.535.

<sup>29</sup> On this point he never wavers; “Dissertation”, “The Clarendon Letters”, “Instructions to the Representative of Braintree”, *Works* 2, “Thoughts on Government”, *Works* 4.

[and]....despatch". An assembly would be too large and slow for this. Furthermore, it would lack the knowledge and the maturity of the Judiciary, which should be impartial and therefore independent of both the Legislature and the Executive.<sup>30</sup>

Most importantly Adams is keen to stress that the character of an all powerful, that is, unchecked assembly would be as rapacious as that of the individual. It would represent the individual writ large:

liable to all the vices, follies, and frailties of an individual; subject to fits of humour,...passion, partialities of prejudice; and from these and other causes, apt to make hasty results and absurd judgements; all which errors ought to be corrected, and inconveniences guarded against, by some controlling power.<sup>31</sup>

To guard against these tendencies, which if unchecked would lead to corruption, unbridled ambition and avarice, the Executive and Legislative power must reside in different branches and the legislature be divided into a lower and a upper house, with the tripartite balance held by the Executive with the power of veto.<sup>32</sup>

The Council or Senate would, in Adams's system, be derived from the Representative (lower) assembly and the Governor in turn from a joint ballot of both assemblies. This model of institutional balance was accepted at this time by Adams as sufficient, suited to the character of the people and to the nature of American society as it was revealed to him.<sup>33</sup>

Thus the key aspect of Adams's qualified optimism is that his confidence exists only within a balanced system. Given this balance, he is hopeful that a republic founded on virtue, therefore "calculated to promote the happiness of the people better

---

<sup>30</sup> "Thoughts" (1776), *Works* 4:195.

<sup>31</sup> "Thoughts" (1776), *Works* 4:206.

<sup>32</sup> "Thoughts" (1775), *Works* 4:187.

<sup>33</sup> "Thoughts" (1775), *Works* 4:187-88.

than any other form”, and based neither on “fear” or “honour” both of which are inimical to the “character and genius of the people”, can be achieved.<sup>34</sup>

His optimism at this time should not be underestimated. He represented mainstream thought, and in 1776 he was very much encouraged by the moderate behaviour, patriotism and sacrifice to the greater good he witnessed in Massachusetts.<sup>35</sup> However, his is a realistic view of man: in 1765 he had espoused the Puritan belief that ambition and lust for power in men is both the basis of the desire in men for liberty *and* the cause of tyranny. Institutions must be formed to channel these base human passions, enabling their positive aspects whilst stifling their negative dimension, a theme to which he returns with greater attention in response to his later disillusionment.<sup>36</sup>

In his *Thoughts on Government* he established his belief that “[t]here is no good government but what is republican...”,<sup>37</sup> then proceeding to describe the variations possible within the republican forms and the different combination of powers in society, resolving that he believes in elite rule. For logistical reasons power must be deputised “from the many, to a few of the most wise and good.”<sup>38</sup> This should not be viewed as a particular reflection on the character of the people, or as the sort of scepticism or indeed fear of democratic politics he later displays. His concerns are administrative and logistical with no explicit social dimension, and in many other respects he proposes the empowerment of the constituents. Their interests should be fully and freely and equally represented,<sup>39</sup> the assembly should be an exact portrait of the people, it should “think, feel, reason and act like them”. The representatives

<sup>34</sup> “Thoughts” (1776), *Works*, 4:193.

<sup>35</sup> Letters: John Adams to James Warren, 22nd December 1773, *Works* 9:335; Wood, *Creation of the American Republic*, p.123; Morgan, *The Meaning of Independence*, pp.17-20.

<sup>36</sup> “Dissertation”, No.3, 30th September 1765, *Papers* 1:118.

<sup>37</sup> “Thoughts”, (1776), *Works*, 4:194.



should also render an account of their stewardship to their constituents, and be subject to annual election and rotation which, Adams at this time believes, will enhance accountability and ensure that the government is kept close to the people resulting in the “wisest and happiest government that human wisdom can contrive...”<sup>40</sup>

The most significant indication of his optimism for the future was his faith in the educational effect of institutions framed in this manner. The idea that a republican system concerned with the common good would act as a regenerative agent was widespread during the period.<sup>41</sup> For Adams, time could result in the increased political maturity of the people, would “inspire them with conscious dignity”, and could foster healthy ambition which in turn would make them “industrious, frugal and sober”: in sum, a superior people. Indeed Adams anticipated a future in which both the Governor and the Senate might be directly elected, for longer terms, if the people so chose.<sup>42</sup>

This represented the summit of his optimism. Adams believed in the self-evident wisdom of the principles he espoused, supported as they were for him by history and experience. His optimism failed and his conclusions changed accordingly when he perceived the dissipation of American virtue. His was part of a wider reappraisal of society and the requirements of government. The Revolutionary republican ideal, whilst suitably emotive and motivating in time of crisis, proved unequal to the challenges of government.<sup>43</sup>

---

<sup>38</sup> “Thoughts”, (1776), *Works*, 4:200.

<sup>39</sup> “Thoughts”, (1776), *Works*, 4:195.

<sup>40</sup> “Thoughts”, (1776), *Works*, 4:200; Letter: John Adams to James Warren, 25th June 1774, *Works* 9:339.

<sup>41</sup> Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic*, pp.47-49.

<sup>42</sup> “Thoughts” (1776), *Works*, 4:197. Even in 1780, he advocated a directly elected governor, in order to make him more distinct, and by implication, independent from either assembly, and suitably empowered to maintain the balance. The Convention weakened this power, however.

<sup>43</sup> John Diggins, *The Lost Soul of American Politics* (New York, 1984), p.32.

Adams takes his existing “system” and, consistent with the spirit of the whole, modifies his conclusions. He looks at the requisite balance in the context of a different society and with a greater understanding.

### THE GROWING DISILLUSIONMENT: TOWARDS A SOCIOLOGICAL VIEW

If the essence of republicanism was to be retained in an unrepublican society, the requisite virtue would have to be achieved through virtuous, more rigorous, regulatory institutions.<sup>44</sup> Adams’s shift in position from a weak, task-based, institutional rationale, to a sociological one for the balance in government reflects this, and is perhaps the most significant development, certainly the nearest instance of a “sea change”, in his thought. It was an early indication of what would become the widespread reappraisal of institutions and view of society by the Federalist movement, which culminated in the Federal Constitution in 1787. The implications of Adams’s reaction to the same tendencies in society however went deeper, and in fact mark the point of his future divergence from the mainstream.

In other respects Adams might seem an unlikely Federalist, given his significant local attachment; indeed, he was initially against the nationalist idea. However he was persuaded, in part by his own critique of the status quo.

The cause of his disillusionment is two-fold. Even during the last years of the Revolution he had become concerned at the decline in patriotism and virtue, and in

---

<sup>44</sup> “Defence” [I], “The best republics will be virtuous, and have been the effect of the well ordered constitution rather than the cause”, *Works* 4:259, Diggins, *Lost Soul of American Politics*, p.71.

1777 he wrote of the “enemy more formidable than famine, pestilence and the sword...the corruption...prevalent in so many American hearts...”<sup>45</sup>

Further, his time in Europe had shown him the full extent and nature of decadence and avarice in the Old World. There he saw, in conjunction with reports from home, what America would become, debased by “...a depravity that is more inconsistent with our Republican Government, than light is with darkness.”<sup>46</sup> This was so even in New England which, at least, Adams had considered the last bastion of republicanism. The avaricious spirit was rampant, as was seditious class conflict, demonstrated by the Shays debtors uprising.

In his *Thoughts* he had emphasised the need for institutions to be an “exact portrait” of the society at large.<sup>47</sup> The natural conclusion of this belief, in the light of the social conflict he saw in Massachusetts, was that the legislature must overtly represent and balance the two orders in society. This is the basis of his sociological view.

Timothy Breen has highlighted the course and cause of Adams’s disillusionment, the nadir of which he demonstrates as having been initiated by the constitutional wrangles in his own state, the place where he expected them least.<sup>48</sup> The assumptions behind Adams’s thought at this time were also challenged and increasingly opposed by radical elements in other colonies.<sup>49</sup>

All but Connecticut and Rhode Island adopted new “republican” constitutions from 1775, with Massachusetts ratifying its “model” constitution, eventually, in 1780.

---

<sup>45</sup> Letter: John Adams to William Gordon, April 8th 1777, *Papers*, 2:149; Letter: John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, 26th May 1777, writing of the threats to their achievement of a Republican Government, the struggle against time and progress *Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 1:5.

<sup>46</sup> Letter: John Adams to William Gordon, April 8th 1777, *Papers*, 2:149.

<sup>47</sup> “Thoughts” (1776), *Works*, 3:196.

<sup>48</sup> Timothy H. Breen, “John Adams’ Fight Against Innovation”, p.514.

<sup>49</sup> Willi Paul Adams, *The First American Constitutions: Republican Ideology and the Making of the State Constitutions in the Revolutionary Era* (Chapel Hill, 1980), pp.5-10.

Most of the states emulated the structure of balance but rarely the spirit.<sup>50</sup> In July 1776 Adams wrote to Francis Dana in confident mood as the various free colonies adapted and adopted new governments. Just months later he was to report back:

...I Fear I was mistaken when, in my last to you, I foretold every colony would have more than one branch to its legislature. The Convention in Pennsylvania has voted for a single assembly...No country ever will be long happy, or even entirely safe and free, which is thus governed. The curse of *jus vagum* will be their portion.<sup>51</sup>

He continues, that he would defend the choice of the people to choose “wisely or foolishly”<sup>52</sup> the form of government they wish. However, in other instances Adams notes with disapproval that in a number of the new States, the Governors were weak, or non-existent, and the Senates emasculated.<sup>53</sup> The political consequences within the individual colonies confirmed for Adams the absolute need for those safeguards which were so alarmingly absent.

It appeared to him that the people had neither had an understanding of sound principles of government, a capacity for the exacting demands of republicanism, nor a principled respect for liberty or law, and that they were drawn in a particularly unhealthy way to France.<sup>54</sup> It became increasingly clear, vindicating Adams’s

<sup>50</sup> Wood, *Creation of the American Republic*, pp.400-414; Marc Kruman, *Between Authority and Liberty: State Constitution making in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill, 1997), pp.16-20.

<sup>51</sup> Letter: John Adams to Francis Dana, 17th August 1776, *Works* 6:429. Accordingly Adams (with no slight amount of satisfaction), records the “convulsions in Pennsylvania” in 1779 which he attributes to the foolish Constitutional structure. *Works*, 6:505.

<sup>52</sup> Letter: John Adams to Francis Dana, 17th August 1776, *Works* 6:429.

<sup>53</sup> Willi Paul Adams, *The First American Constitutions*, p.133-40; David G. Smith, *The Convention and the Constitution: The Political Ideas of the Founding Fathers* (New York, 1987), pp.13-25

<sup>54</sup> “Diary”. He compares this lack of understanding with that of the Cromwellian Regime during the Commonwealth Period. (Letter: John Adams to Unknown, 27th April 1777, *Papers*, 5:162-3). His attitude to this period is interesting. In *Canon and Feudal Law* he sees the English Civil War and especially the Glorious Revolution as mile-stones in the drawn-out emancipation from Civil and Ecclesiastical tyranny. When he visited Worcester, England he chastised the local inhabitants for their apparent ignorance of the events of the previous century declaring that he “stood on holy ground,” much holier than their Churches. He was, however very critical of Cromwell and his regime. (“Notes on a Tour of English Country Seats &c., with Thomas Jefferson”, April 1786, *Diary and Autobiography*, 3:184-5). Worcester Massachusetts, where Adams taught school for some years, was named in honour of the victory of Parliament at the Battle of Worcester (Karen Pierson, *A Tale of Two Cities: Worcester England and Worcester Massachusetts* (Woonton Almeley, 1998), pp.1-5).

precautions in his *Thoughts*, that the people were as capable of tyranny as any King.<sup>55</sup> they were capricious and licentious, and the legislatures were rather *too* representative of them.<sup>56</sup> Acting in spite and with malice, they perpetrated confiscation's, they suspended debts, enacted *ex post facto* laws, and reversed judicial decisions. Paper money schemes were introduced to defraud creditors.<sup>57</sup> Additionally, there was a general lack of a constitutional ethos,<sup>58</sup> the unchecked legislative bodies accumulating legislative, executive and judicial powers thus rendering the laws neither "impartially" nor "exactly executed."<sup>59</sup>

When Thomas Jefferson returned from France, he was even more convinced of the virtue of his people, certainly in contrast to the profligacy and decadence of Europe.<sup>60</sup> When Adams returned however, he found the patriotism of the early years had been succeeded by profiteering, and that the once frugal people were now covetous of European luxury.<sup>61</sup> The Revolutionary War which should have been the final act of redemption had unleashed individualistic and acquisitive sentiments which threatened the virtue of the people and brought into doubt a republican future.

The fact that uni-cameral, unbalanced constitutions were adopted at all was a further indication of the declining character of the people. Reflecting upon the period in 1789 he explains to Dr Richard Price how it appeared to him that his "countrymen

---

<sup>55</sup> Wood, *Creation of the American Republic*, p.409; Edmund Morgan, *Birth of the Republic* (Chicago, 1992) p.45.

<sup>56</sup> Wood, *Creation of the American Republic*, pp.410-15; Morgan, *Birth of the Republic*, p.18.

<sup>57</sup> Wood, *Creation of the American Republic*, pp.411-15

<sup>58</sup> Many of the Constitutions had been enacted as ordinary legislation, with no extraordinary process needed for their alteration. The Massachusetts Constitution of 1780 has been cited as the first to result from a modern method of Ratification. It had the status of Fundamental Law (Kruman, *Between Authority and Liberty* pp.10-20).

<sup>59</sup> Letters: John Adams to Mercy Otis Warren, December 12th 1785. "Adams-Warren Letters" *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, 2:269; Howe, *Changing Political Thought of John Adams*, pp.120-5; Madison, *The Federalist* No.48 (London, 1996); Wood, *Creation of the American Republic*, pp.400-404.

<sup>60</sup> Wood, *Creation of the American Republic*, pp.410-23.

<sup>61</sup> "Autobiography", *Diary and Autobiography*, 3:285; Page Smith, *John Adams* (New York, 1962), 2:685-9.

were running wild and into danger, from a too ardent and inconsistent pursuit of erroneous opinions of government...".<sup>62</sup> This "critical period", of over-powerful, unchecked, legislatures acting against due process, damaging the "national interest"<sup>63</sup> saw new men of dubious virtue elected by an emboldened people, abusing their power just as the British had done.<sup>64</sup> Conservatives like Charles Carroll<sup>65</sup> began to regret the rash Declaration of Independence, as increasingly it appeared that the people, these people, were capable of oppression.<sup>66</sup>

For Adams and like-minded men this was the perversion of republicanism, and certainly not what they had fought for. For others, however, the sovereign authority of the people was just what they *had* fought for. The town of Westminster, Massachusetts, demanded of their proposed Constitution in 1778 a fuller and more powerful role for the "people", for why else did they "waste their blood and treasure" in a war for liberty if they were "not fit to enjoy" it?<sup>67</sup> Claims and arguments of this sort, though not universal,<sup>68</sup> were commonplace during the long haul to the 1780 Constitution in Massachusetts. Adams's fight against these forces of innovation in his own state made a deep impression on him; his "local attachment died"<sup>69</sup> and this trauma determined the direction of his future thought.

Fundamentally Adams was out of touch; he assumed that the people of Massachusetts, steeped in their institutional heritage, would not seek to radically

<sup>62</sup> Letter: John Adams to Dr. Richard Price, 20 May 1789, *Works*, 9:559.

<sup>63</sup> Adams was infuriated, and seriously hampered in his negotiations in Great Britain by the actions of some of the states acting against the terms of the Treaty of Paris; Howe, *Changing Political Thought of John Adams*, p.213; Wood, *Creation of the American Republic*, pp.404-410.

<sup>64</sup> Wood, *Creation of the American Republic*, pp.404-410.

<sup>65</sup> Jensen, *The Revolution Within America*, p.131. Charles Carroll of Carrollton, Maryland (1737-1832). From a powerful Catholic family, one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence and cousin of John Carroll first Roman Catholic Bishop of the United States. (*Burkes Landed Gentry of the British Empire*, "American Supplement").

<sup>66</sup> Jensen, *The Revolution Within America*, p.253.

<sup>67</sup> Taylor (ed.), *Massachusetts From Colony to Commonwealth, Documents on the Formation of its Constitution* p.27. (Chapel Hill, 1961).

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.* pp.39-40.

change and challenge it. His assumptions about the best form of government, elite rule, and civic virtue suffered successive refutations, as he, helpless, received “frenzied letters” about plans to discard the old government, abolish the Governor, and institute an entirely new structure more fitting to the so-called “spirit of ’76”, all but erasing completely traces of their old imperial origins in favour of a more simple “republican form.”<sup>70</sup>

In the event, Adams was able to bring his influence to bear in Massachusetts. His draft of the Constitution was adopted with only a few, though significant changes. Significantly, the Convention weakened the Executive by disallowing an absolute veto, which Adams considered essential, and Executive independence was compromised by the power of the Senate, points around which his subsequent thought revolved.<sup>71</sup>

In its form, and in the process of its ratification, however, it represented a significant shift from “legislature-centred” Constitutions, and stood as a model for the subsequent Federal Constitution,<sup>72</sup> which in itself was the product of a conservative reaction against the state of affairs under the weak, ineffectual Articles of Confederation.<sup>73</sup>

However, the ordeal of the process contributed to the further development of Adams’s thought from that expressed in his *Thoughts*. Writing to an English friend he outlines the character of the fears and priorities which underlay his future thought:

---

<sup>69</sup> Breen, “John Adams’ Fight Against Innovation”, p. 514.

<sup>70</sup> Taylor, (ed.) *Massachusetts From Colony to Commonwealth*, pp.29-30, 120.

<sup>71</sup> Annotated “...Report of a Constitution or Form of Government for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts”, *Papers*, 8:228-271. The Convention also broadened the property qualification, rejected Adams’s proposal that the Governor, as Commander-in-Chief, appoint Militia Officers, retaining the tradition of, in most cases, election by their immediate subordinates, a practice which provoked derision amongst the British Army during the 1812 War. Whilst there was opposition to the independence of Adams’s Executive, the convention in one respect was more conservative than Adams in rejecting his proposal for the rotation of the (now weakened) governor.

<sup>72</sup> Kruman, *Between Authority and Liberty*, pp.16-20.

In this country, the pendulum has vibrated too far to the popular side, driven by men without experience or judgement, and horrid ravages have been made upon property by arbitrary multitudes...to place property at the mercy of a majority who have no property, is *committere agnum lupo*. My fundamental maxim of Government is, never trust the lamb to the custody of the wolf.<sup>74</sup>

He had acquired a habit of analysis, and from 1780 strove to reconcile experience with theory. Thus he increasingly emphasises the need for balance, and for this balance to reflect the natural, *social*, divisions in society between the “many and the few”, necessarily balanced by the “one”. Essentially his view of the people and of society becomes one of inevitable and eternal conflict between factions in society, the rich and the poor, the “gentleman and the simpleman,”<sup>75</sup> the aristocratic and democratic powers. He had always recognised ranks in society,<sup>76</sup> but the optimism of the mid 1770s had caused him and others to be convinced by the relatively egalitarian nature of American society that such class divisions, aristocratic dominance and servile dependence, *in extremis*, belonged to the Old World they had rejected. The experiences of the late 1770s persuaded Adams that such interests and antagonisms were as acute in the New World, and herein lies his gradual adaptation from an institutional balance to one which reflected more fully “the course of nature.”<sup>77</sup> The difference between a sociologically based foundation for the division and an institutional non-social division represents the methodological difference between

---

<sup>73</sup> Smith, *The Convention and the Constitution*, pp.12-15; Gordon Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic*, pp.405-10.

<sup>74</sup> Letter: John Adams to Thomas Brand-Hollis, December 3rd 1787, *Works*, 9:571.

<sup>75</sup> “Defence” [III], *Works* 6:185.

<sup>76</sup> “Diary”, 24th December 1766, *Diary and Autobiography*, 1:326.

<sup>77</sup> “Defence” [I] *Works* 3; “Discourse on Davila”, *Works* 6. This is the form he advocates in Massachusetts: Ch. II Sec. II.i, (Senate had a property basis) and Ch. II Sec. III.i-ii; “There shall be...a representation of the people, annually elected....founded upon the principle of equality.” (The John Adams “Draft of the Massachusetts Constitution”, *Papers*, 8:244-47). This intention is confirmed in *Address of the Constitutional Convention in Massachusetts to the People explaining that the Senate represented Property and the House of Representatives, “People”*. Taylor, (ed.) *Massachusetts, Colony to Commonwealth*, p.122; “Taylor Letters” 1814, *Works*, 6:509.



pessimistic realism and the ideological optimism upon which the urge for innovation was based.

Adams was convinced that the inspiration for the “wild” ideas opposing his good sense lay in the idealistic French thought which was increasingly popular for those who sought to promote the radical legacy of the American Revolution. Adams’s attempted refutation of the arguments for simple, uni-cameral, government was directed against Turgot, Paine, Burgh, Condorcet, Diderot, d’Alembert, Voltaire, Rousseau,<sup>78</sup> and their followers. He rejects their overall quest for human perfection, a concept which bemused him<sup>79</sup> and he regarded their writings as “extremely mistaken in the true construction of a free government”.<sup>80</sup> He sought to counteract this in his *Defence of the Constitutions* by extolling the principles of balanced interest and a socially realistic view of society and government, such as he had sought to achieve in Massachusetts.

The French were increasingly influential in radical democratic republicanism.<sup>81</sup> The developing “cult of the people” and the urge for innovation, represented real philosophical and methodological differences which were based on an alternative view of the implications of the American Revolution and were borne of the differences only temporarily overcome during the revolutionary struggle. They were a direct challenge to Adams’s deeply held assumptions, an opposition which produced in Adams enhanced attachment and commitment to them.

<sup>78</sup> Letter: John Adams to Dr. Richard Price, May 20th 1789, *Works*, 9:559; April 19th 1790, *Works*, 9:564.

<sup>79</sup> Letter: John Adams to Dr. Benjamin Rush, 11th November 1806, *The Spur of Fame*, p.223.

<sup>80</sup> Letter: John Adams to Dr. Richard Price, May 20th 1789, *Works*, 9:559.

<sup>81</sup> Ralph Hetchman, “France and American Politics 1763-1793”, *Political Science Quarterly* 78 (June 1980), p.235; Hetchman suggests that in part the attraction in some quarters to France, especially after the French Revolution (1789) was based on a desire for culture, in place of the rejection of their English heritage, as part of the achievement of “complete Independence.” It was a contrived effort, which would have little lasting influence: old habits died hard.

What had the Revolution rejected? What did a republic preclude? Thomas Jefferson for example, was more optimistic about the possibility of progress, and was more confident in the capacity of the “many” to rule.<sup>82</sup> For him the Revolution was about the emancipation of the individual; he believed that the New World offered a completely different way, and that 1776 had effected a revolution in the principles of government.<sup>83</sup> Accordingly, for the radical the rationale for the balance advocated by Adams had been banished by the Revolution. His critics viewed the historic need for the *popular* balance to lie in the hard won defence *against* aristocratic and monarchical power - a check upon *their* power not on that of the *people*, from which there was now no threat. The New World was free of a feudal, vested aristocratic interest, and the social conditions and prevailing character seemed to preclude its future occurrence. Why then was there an “aristocratic” Senate? The term “aristocracy” often provoked this sort of emotional response. It was not seen as applicable in America and was regarded as an unacceptable term in political discourse, an epithet of abuse.<sup>84</sup> Given the virtue of the people and absence of an opposing interest, what need was there, in the achievement of the common good, for a Governor with executive powers akin to the British Monarch they had just defeated? For the new radicals the Revolution had been about achieving power, and like the good people of Westminster, Massachusetts they could see no justification for any sort of check or limitation upon them.<sup>85</sup>

---

<sup>82</sup> Merrill Peterson, *Adams and Jefferson: A Revolutionary Dialogue* (Oxford, 1978) p.82; Wood, *Creation of the American Republic*, p.425.

<sup>83</sup> Peterson, *Adams and Jefferson*, p.84; Richard Matthews, *The Radical Politics of Thomas Jefferson: A Revisionist View*, p.9; John Ferling, *John Adams*, p.263.

<sup>84</sup> Stewart, *The Opposition Press in the Federalist Era*, pp.485-90.

<sup>85</sup> Taylor, *Colony to Commonwealth*, p.34; Letter: Abigail Adams to Thomas Jefferson, January 29th 1787, *The Adams-Jefferson Letters*, p.168.

That America was different, that she was an alternative, was a fundamental aspect of the Revolutionary ideology. For there to be an aristocracy would indicate failure, so identified was the term and phenomenon with the decline, decadence and corruption of Great Britain and the Tories, who had been symbolically banished. Antipathy to aristocracy had deep roots, as Adams described in 1765, which had been intensified by propagandists like Thomas Paine.<sup>86</sup> Hostility to it became synonymous with creedal conformity and the expressed fear of aristocracy became a major plank of the Anti-Federalists' "platform."

Jefferson, as a progressive, with no implicit faith in history, an almost Paineite antipathy to monarchy and to an hereditary aristocracy, fervently believing in American exceptionalism, sought to demonstrate that the traditional pillars of aristocracy were not present in America. He claimed that they had been eradicated by the culture; the social conditions (broad based property ownership,<sup>87</sup> absence of a substantial tenant class) and the legislative abolition, or weak tradition, of entail and primogeniture. Jefferson had been responsible for the abolition of these last two agents of aristocracy in Virginia, thereby laying "the axe to the root of the Pseudo-Aristocracy."<sup>88</sup>

For Adams, however, progress could mean the scientifically-based acceptance of long-established principles, and his position reflects just this. Despite his earlier antipathy toward aristocratic privilege,<sup>89</sup> his thought moves toward a sociological, perhaps almost quasi-feudal interpretation of constitution balance, in form and spirit,

---

<sup>86</sup> Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*, pp.124-45, 271-286; Wood, *Creation of the American Republic*, pp. 399-403; Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, pp.36-53.

<sup>87</sup> Land confiscated from the banished Loyalists aided this distribution.

<sup>88</sup> Letter: Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, October 18th 1813, *Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 2:387.

<sup>89</sup> His Draft "Bill of Rights" founds Government on the Consent of the People, and Article VI declares that Government is for the Common Good, and disallows hereditary offices "the idea of a man born a magistrate, lawgiver, or judge, is absurd and unnatural...". *Papers* 8:239.

which is increasingly in opposition to the views held by Jefferson and others who confine their support to, at most, a weaker task-based institutional balance.<sup>90</sup>

In defiance, Adams not only demonstrates that aristocracy *cannot* be eradicated or ignored in government, but that the aristocratic interests must be given an *equal role* in the balance of government. Thus his draft of the Massachusetts Constitution established a strong Senate, elected on the basis of property and with a veto on legislation. This, in defiance of Turgotian claims that it represents an “unreasonable imitation of the usages of England”,<sup>91</sup> he maintains is essential for the stability of the Commonwealth and the security of her liberties, and to be essentially in the interest of the whole people as a bulwark against tyranny.<sup>92</sup>

Both Jefferson and Turgot had suspicions that within the socially reflective balance, which they both thought unnecessary in this Republic “based on equality of all citizens,”<sup>93</sup> there was a danger that “by striving to prevent imaginary dangers they have created real ones.”<sup>94</sup> Adams is resolute in his refutation of Turgot’s criticisms, and the idea which underpinned them,<sup>95</sup> his reputed advocacy of a sovereign single assembly “bringing all the authorities into one, that of the nation.”<sup>96</sup> Adams is here attempting to rehabilitate the “aristocracy” by extracting the functional rationale for it, by disassociating the term from the highly-charged emotive images of the Old World of feudal Barons, titles, “ribbons and garters.”<sup>97</sup>

---

<sup>90</sup> Letter: Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, May 27th 1813, *Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 2:323.

<sup>91</sup> Letter: Anne Turgot to Richard Price, 22nd March 1778, quoted in *Works*, 4:279.

<sup>92</sup> Letter: John Adams to Samuel Adams, 18th October 1790, *Works*, 6:417-20.

<sup>93</sup> Letter: Anne Robert Turgot to Dr. Richard Price, 22nd March 1778, *Works* 4:279.

<sup>94</sup> *Op. cit.*

<sup>95</sup> Letter: Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, October 28th 1813, *Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 2:388.

<sup>96</sup> Letter: Anne Turgot to Richard Price, 22nd March 1778, *Works*, 4:279.

<sup>97</sup> “Taylor Letters”, *Works*, 6:457.

## OSTRACISM OF THE ARISTOCRACY: A FUNCTIONAL VIEW OF THE ARISTOCRAT

Peter Viereck has described Adams's *Defence* as a "classic exposition of Burkean conservatism."<sup>98</sup> His critics, contemporaries and those who succeeded them would perhaps dispute a description of his "strange...faulty book" as a "classic" under any circumstances. Notwithstanding this, such a description I feel misrepresents both Adams and Burke.

Adams, an English thinker, and according to Clinton Rossiter perhaps the "founder of American Conservatism,"<sup>99</sup> found common ground and a common cause with Burke during the 1790s in their opposition to the French Revolution, and not least in their mutual disdain for Paine, that "insolent blasphemer of all things sacred and transcendent, libeller of all that is good..."<sup>100</sup>

In other respects too, Adams's disposition was conservative, and increasingly so, as both his behaviour and his thought were driven in reaction to events and prevailing moods. As became even more apparent during the 1790s, there was something of the romantic traditionalist in him. In spite of himself he found himself impressed with the grandeur, pomp, and ceremony of the European courts.<sup>101</sup> This "High American" early advocate of independence was nervous and deferential and fastidiously adhered to the conventions of etiquette when he was presented to his former Sovereign as America's first Minister to the Court of St. James in 1785.<sup>102</sup> Rossiter encapsulates his underlying conservative nature thus:

<sup>98</sup> Peter R.E. Viereck, *Conservatism: From John Adams to Churchill*, (Westport, Connecticut, 1978), p.12.

<sup>99</sup> Clinton Rossiter, "The Legacy of John Adams", *Yale Review* XLVI, No. 4 (January 1957).

<sup>100</sup> "Autobiography" *Diary and Autobiography*, 4:5.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.* 4:92-93.

<sup>102</sup> Letter John Adams to John Jay, June 2nd 1785, *Works*, 7:255-56; "Diary" *Diary and Autobiography*, 3:180; Philip Levy, "John Adams Presents his Credentials", *History Today* (1), vol. 9 (1959).

John Adams...cannot be adequately understood except as a model of genuine conservatism. He responded to conservative urges, he formed conservative habits, he cherished conservative virtues, he lived a conservative life, he was reverent if not always pious, self-disciplined if not always self contained.<sup>103</sup>

However, as I endeavour to demonstrate in the further discussion of his *Defence*, throughout the present chapter and the next, whilst their conclusions are often similar, the respective backgrounds, approach and indeed motivations of Adams and Burke differ greatly.<sup>104</sup> It would be difficult to justify a case which made Adams a conservative in the Burkean mould given his record as a rebel and quite a radical one at that.<sup>105</sup> Burke provides an almost dogmatic support for tradition and an opposition to rash impulsive change, not least on the grounds that the alternative may be worse, whereas Adams is much more selective in the traditions he wishes to uphold. Both distrust radical abstractions of the French variety but Adams is more ready to attempt an understanding of society though he increasingly concludes that no real change can occur in many areas. That is, Adams opposes the French conclusions for their faulty reasoning, not the reasoning itself. Here fundamentally lies their difference.

Burke's support for monarchy and aristocracy is founded more upon a basis of romantic attachment to the status quo, whereas Adams seeks to rationally justify monarchic-like and aristocratic-like institutions for their functional merits *only*, as part of an almost mathematically rigid balance, of the sort which Burke would reject.<sup>106</sup>

<sup>103</sup> Clinton Rossiter, "The Legacy of John Adams", p.533.

<sup>104</sup> They differed in other respects: Burke concentrated on the conflict between the Aristocracy and the Monarchy, the scene of the Whig view of British history and the basis of his understanding of the British Constitution, whereas, after c.1778, Adams is occupied with the conflict between the people and the aristocrats.

<sup>105</sup> In his later career, conservative elements in the Federalist Party, which included a large number of former Tories, regarded Adams with suspicion, remembering his radicalism in 1776.

<sup>106</sup> Randall B. Ripley, "Adams, Burke and Eighteenth century Conservatism", *Political Science Quarterly* 80 (1965), p. 234.

Given this, Adams' accommodating remarks should not be taken as an endorsement or an advocacy of an aristocracy or a monarchy, but rather as observations of what he sees as inevitable. Ryerson makes a case for his being consistently anti-aristocratic though mildly monarchist from this time.<sup>107</sup> He is indeed wary of aristocratic power, as wary as he is about democratic tyranny in this period, hence his emphasis on the role of the Executive as part of a strong and meaningful balance. His youthful mockery of aristocratic pretensions remained with him; however he reproached ideological condemnation of aristocrats as a class by his cousin Samuel<sup>108</sup> and railed against Paine's spiteful and inflammatory tirade against them.<sup>109</sup> He sees little merit in rejecting or ignoring a natural social phenomenon when it should be studied, acknowledged and regulated. The aristocracy should be ostracised, placed in their own assembly where their influence could be regulated, their virtues utilised and their vices neutralised by the Executive and the popular check.

In his youth Adams pondered the nature of aristocracy<sup>110</sup> and considered how its occurrence might be prevented.<sup>111</sup> However, in abandoning his hope of more progress in political science he views history and the future in increasingly traditional terms of development along almost pre-ordained lines. He looks once more to history for guidance, and forms a view of aristocracy as a social phenomenon. He develops his arguments further over the next quarter century, his arguments growing more vociferous as his understanding of society develops. The manifest and violent divisions in society and the tumults provoked by the "ignorant restless desperadoes

<sup>107</sup> Richard A. Ryerson, "Like a Hare before the Hunters", p.17.

<sup>108</sup> Letter: John Adams to Samuel Adams, *Works*, 8:465.

<sup>109</sup> "Autobiography", *Diary and Autobiography*, 3:330.

<sup>110</sup> "Diary", December 24th, 1766, *Diary and Autobiography*, 1:236-7. This entry is a draft Essay as part of his correspondence in papers in dispute with Jonathan Sewall, "Philanthrop".

without conscience or principles”<sup>112</sup> in Massachusetts convinced him further of the enduring and apparently eternal nature of certain socio-economic divisions and points of conflict in society. These divisions and interests were incompatible with the disinterested homogeneity demanded by a virtuous republic, but nevertheless they had to be recognised and accommodated. The presence of Old World problems, then, demanded Old World solutions. Adams sought an explanation and, in the event, a solution and a means to reconcile the essentials of republicanism with an un-republican society. In looking to history his findings convinced him, as he explained in 1790:

I am so well satisfied of my own principles, that I think them as eternal and unchangeable as the earth and its inhabitants. I know mankind must finally adopt a balance between the executive and legislative powers, and another balance between the poor and the rich in the legislature...<sup>113</sup>

Thus he derived a justification for a socially based, rigidly balanced constitution. His detailed survey of some of the long-established and enduring republics of his day demonstrates that in all of them, a condition to which he attributes their longevity, is a recognised aristocratic presence, interest and corresponding role in government. In these societies Adams describes the inevitable ascendance of certain families, prominent names, “representing the best in society”.

His survey was intended to form a decisive refutation of Turgot who in 1778 had criticised states like Massachusetts for adopting England’s “equilibrium of powers.”<sup>114</sup> It takes the form of a detailed description of various societies ranging from the isolated mountain-top republic of San Marino of 5,000 souls,<sup>115</sup> containing

---

<sup>111</sup> Letter: John Adams to Count Sarsfield, 31st January, 1785, *Works* 8:370.

<sup>112</sup> Letter: Abigail Adams to Thomas Jefferson, January 29th, 1787, *The Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 1:168, referring to the Shays insurgents.

<sup>113</sup> Letter: John Adams to Alexander Jardine, 1st June 1790, *Works*, 9:568.

<sup>114</sup> Letter: Anne Turgot to Dr. Richard Price, 22nd March 1778, *Works*, 4:279.

<sup>115</sup> San Marino dates from the fourth century, now embracing 24 square miles and has a population of c.25,000.



three castles, three convents and five churches, to a profusion of miscellaneous Swiss and German city states. All of these, have, in varying degrees of codification, mixed constitutions with a vital role for the natural aristocracy. Adams had always opposed simple governments whether “democratical”, aristocratic or monarchic in nature, and his thought expressed here only reinforces this and elaborates upon the necessary alternative. His view of human nature, always suspicious, had received negative reinforcement. The thirst for power, he saw, made all men potentially tyrannous, and this ambition must therefore be checked by another interest, what Madison described as ambition counteracting ambition.

San Marino is by no means a perfect democracy. It is a mixture of monarchy, aristocracy and democracy as really as Sparta or Rome were and as the Massachusetts, New York and Maryland now are, in which the powers of the governor, senate and assembly are more exactly ascertained and nicely balanced.<sup>116</sup>

Even the smallest societies had recognised, as Adams now did, this natural stratification. Additionally, to balance the aristocracy and the democracy (in their respective forums) Adams typically found “a head, a chief, under various denominations.”<sup>117</sup> This being so he resolves that the “body politic cannot subsist any more than an animal without a head...”<sup>118</sup>

Thus the argument in the first volume is based on an “obsession with social strife”,<sup>119</sup> and on the natural stratification in society between the many and the few, and the consequential need for a strong executive. This established, Adams justifies a further volume by describing in vivid terms the fates of past republics which have not “satisfied the passions” of each class by providing a balance between them.<sup>120</sup>

---

<sup>116</sup> “Defence” [I], *Works* 4:308.

<sup>117</sup> “Defence” [I], *Works* 4:577.

<sup>118</sup> “Defence” [I], *Works* 4:379.

<sup>119</sup> Rossiter, “The Legacy of John Adams”, pp.531-2.

<sup>120</sup> “Defence” [I], *Works*, 4:12-17.

Through a series of examples, in the exhaustive manner of the preceding volume, he triumphantly describes the fate of republics which have had an incomplete balance of power, citing instances from history where republics have been founded upon the principles Adams attributes to Turgot. The survey is broad and detailed, the conclusions identical: the fates of those Italian Republics in addition to that of “all the ancient republics of Greece...and Asia Minor, as well as those...in Switzerland, Italy, and elsewhere...[shows the] caprice, instability, turbulence, revolutions and the prevalence of those two plagues and scourges of mankind, tyranny and anarchy...”,<sup>121</sup> all through the lack of balance. Without fail Adams’s examples show where usurpation of power had been perpetrated by an over-mighty aristocracy or licentious democracy. He concentrates on the chequered history of Florence, its history being “full of lessons of wisdom extremely to [his] purpose”.<sup>122</sup> This case occupies the greater part of the whole volume. All is intended to demonstrate the need for equilibrium between the different “orders” of men based on the contention that they are all equally rapacious, ambitious, corrupting and corruptible.<sup>123</sup> In his concluding reflections upon the fate of Florence, Adams draws out as lessons the eternal laws of political science:

Let the reader...ask himself whether it does not appear like a satire, written with the express and only purpose of exposing to contempt, ridicule, and indignation, the idea of “government in one centre”...<sup>124</sup>

This then reveals the theme and basis of his methodology, developed from that employed in 1765, and which in turn determines the course of his future thought. His “dogma of balance” becomes akin to an obsession, his habit of analysis determines his ongoing search for a means to secure a more perfect balance of interests. In the

---

<sup>121</sup> “Defence” [II], *Works*, 5:87.

<sup>122</sup> “Defence” [II], *Works*, 5:88.

<sup>123</sup> “Defence” [II], *Works*, 5:89.

<sup>124</sup> “Defence” [II], *Works*, 5:90.

coming decade this leads to his conclusions and policy concerning the relative power and nature of each element of the tripartite "one, few and many". This "analysis of antiquity"<sup>125</sup> is the frame within which his thought develops thereafter; all else is elaboration of the details and means of achieving this equilibrium.

Essentially his time spent immersed in the bloody and repetitive histories of past, failed, republics haunted him - he became a captive of history. He convinced himself, more than he convinced others, that the same fate would befall his young society if she did not heed the lessons of history which he so selflessly explained. It is for this reason, with the fervency characteristic of a convert, that he attempted to describe America in terms of inevitability, which, whilst historically sound, were politically heretical.

---

<sup>125</sup> Disparagingly called this by John Taylor. "Taylor Letters", *Works*, 6:464.

## CHAPTER IV

*Providence Over Error: The Justification for Hereditary Office-Holding*

The Science of Government, like all other sciences, is best pursued by observation and Experiment - Remark the Phenomenon of Nature, and from these deduce the Principles and Ends of Government.<sup>1</sup>

At the age of twenty three, John Adams resolved to “Aim at an exact Knowledge of the nature and the means of Government. Compare the different forms of it with each other and each of them with their effects on public and private happiness.”<sup>2</sup> At this time, during the 1750s, notwithstanding this ambitious resolution, Adams succumbed to the other, more social pursuits of “drinking tea at the Colonel’s.” His inability to apply himself despite these good intentions caused him often to chastise himself as he did whilst at Harvard for having wasted whole days merely rambling, “gaping and gazing”, and for not having had “one new idea [all] week.”<sup>3</sup>

However, at length events caused him, as I have shown in the foregoing chapters, to engage in this study and in the formulation of a science of government based on a view of society and human nature, drawing upon his wide reading, legal training and his New England heritage, all of which contributed to his “logic of rebellion.”<sup>4</sup> Thereafter he pursued its study further in his work on the Massachusetts Constitution.

His *Defence of the Constitution* represented his view of the revealed, eternal nature of mankind and of society, upon the comprehension of which stable institutions could be established. The sociological view of government, further developed through the 1790s by Adams with greater comprehension and renewed vigour, was derived from his studies of past republics. These convinced him that it was the inevitable

<sup>1</sup> “Notes for an Oration at Braintree,” Spring 1772, *Diary and Autobiography*, 2:56.

<sup>2</sup> “Diary” December 5th 1758, *Diary and Autobiography*, 1:61.

<sup>3</sup> “Diary” April 13th 1756, 15th April 1756, *Diary and Autobiography*, 1:26-7.

nature of all societies to be dominated by the conflict between the “cunning” aristocratic interest, and the rapacious, levelling democratic faction.

John Taylor in his *Inquiry into the Principles and Policy of the Government of the United States* (published 1814) criticised Adams’s application of what he calls the “Analysis of Antiquity”,<sup>5</sup> that is Adams’s assumptions of and reliance upon a natural social and factional division of the “one, few and the many”. As I have shown,<sup>6</sup> this contention and the sense that it is so in all societies “modern and ancient”, in America as in Europe, becomes a characteristic aspect of Adams’s thought:

These authorities are modern enough, and ancient enough, to prove the analysis of the one, the few and the many, to be universal, and proceeding from natural causes. Which of these authorities, sir, will you deny, contradict, or explain away?<sup>7</sup>

As Wood argues, “For Adams this balancing of the forces inevitable in every society was the Enlightenment fulfilled; a principle of political science discovered to be applicable to all times and all peoples.”<sup>8</sup> It was this principle - the need for institutions to reflect and balance these naturally occurring social, interest-based divisions with a vigorous executive maintaining the equilibrium - which he justified in his *Defence*. It remained a feature of his future thought, as the only model which could regulate these interests, accommodate the nature of man and thereby secure the achievement of the Revolution as he understood it.

The Revolution for him had been borne of a desire for security of rights and for just laws. This was the basis of his criterion of republican government as “that in

---

<sup>4</sup> “Dissertation on the Canon and Feudal Laws”, (Early Draft), *Papers*, 1:108.

<sup>5</sup> Letter: John Adams to John Taylor, “Taylor Letters”, *Works*, 6:463; Gordon Wood, *Creation of The American Republic*, (Chapel Hill, 1969, 1998), p.588.

<sup>6</sup> In Chapter III.

<sup>7</sup> Letter, John Adams to John Taylor, “Taylor Letters”, *Works*, 6:464.

<sup>8</sup> Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic*, p.579.

which the sovereignty resides in more than one man..."<sup>9</sup> and that which was thereby "an Empire of Laws and not of Men."<sup>10</sup> This continued to be his principal objective, the better and full achievement of which remained the motivation for his works which argued for the axiom of constitutional balance (perhaps Adams's most dogmatic philosophical position) as the scientific principle upon which could be founded the realisation of this Revolutionary aim, the "impartial and exact execution of the laws."<sup>11</sup>

His view of society and his deductions from it were challenged, because *they* challenged a number of Revolutionary assumptions. His preoccupation with regulatory institutions, his assumptions about social stratification, his doubts, and his ongoing interpretation and critique of his countrymen which he pursued throughout the 1780s and 90s, on his own admission "ruined his reputation."<sup>12</sup> He consistently protested his Revolutionary credentials, and promised to "forfeit his life" if one sentiment in any of his works could "by fair construction" be found to "favour the introduction of hereditary monarchy or aristocracy". He had, he claimed always written "to support and strengthen the Constitutions of the United States."<sup>13</sup> But his arguments and conclusions, in this sensitive and at times hysterical era, were too subtle. They provoked passionate reactions, through which he was branded by his opponents during the fractional '90s an Anglophile, "...Aristocrat in principle, Monarchist at heart, no friend to the Rights of Man, and hostile to the republicanism of the United States."<sup>14</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Letter: John Adams to Roger Sherman, 1789, *Works*, 6:428.

<sup>10</sup> "Thoughts on Government" (1776), *Works*, 3:192.

<sup>11</sup> "Thoughts", *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Letter: John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, July 13th 1813, *Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 2:356; Adams's annotation, in "Davila" 1812, *Works*, 6:228.

<sup>13</sup> Letter, John Adams to John Taylor, "Taylor Letters", *Works*, 6:464.

<sup>14</sup> Letter: Charles Holt to John Adams, 1820, *Works*, 10:292. Holt had been the editor of a Jeffersonian (Opposition) Newspaper. He writes to Adams at this time to repent for having branded him such

Adams feared that it would be his fate to be abused, “misrepresented and misunderstood”<sup>15</sup> in this manner, and considered his works to have been vilified and attacked more than any other, “except the Bible.”<sup>16</sup> Continuing the theme he described himself as having been “...pelted for twenty or thirty years with as many stones as ever were thrown at St. Stephen, when St. Paul held the clothes of the stoners...”<sup>17</sup> Notwithstanding an allowance for his penchant for melodrama the seriousness of these charges cannot be over-estimated. America was an insecure fledgling republic, amidst potentially hostile monarchical powers, founded in part from an obsession with plots and subversion. The consciously plain (and therefore “virtuous”) republicans had surely rejected such aristocratic notions of “orders” and “ranks” in society.<sup>18</sup>

Adams wished to separate legitimate political terms from the highly charged emotional reactions he had to endure, and to distinguish his observations and predictions from advocacy or partisan attachment. His was a consciously scientific analysis, although this is at times obscured by the style of his works and their sheer bulk. Their style is legalistic, reflecting his methodology. He assembles historical examples like legal authorities to prove his argument and labours points with repeated examples. As has been seen in chapter III, his case for balanced constitutions and a sociologically based frame of government is demonstrated through the citation of many examples of past republics, the older the better.<sup>19</sup> His “time spent labouring

---

during the 1790s. Holt had been imprisoned under the Sedition Law passed by the Federalist administration.

<sup>15</sup> Letter: John Adams to Charles Holt, 1820, *Works*, 10:292.

<sup>16</sup> “Taylor Letters”, *Works*, 6:447.

<sup>17</sup> “Taylor Letters”, *Works*, 6:447-8.

<sup>18</sup> Letter: Roger Sherman to John Adams, July 1789, *Works*, 6:442; Gordon Wood, *The Radicalism of the Revolution* (New York, 1991), pp.270-75.

<sup>19</sup> Zoltan Haraszti, *John Adams and the Prophets of Progress* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1952), pp.15-18.

through Italian rubbish”<sup>20</sup> convinced him that these principles and the social phenomena they reflect were self-evident. His adherence to the overall “Analysis of Antiquity” determined his mood of fatalistic acceptance of a stratified society and class conflict politics, perceiving through his pursuit of eternal principles a model of society which is an inevitable product of human nature. He cannot doubt the unchanging nature of man, driven by passions for distinction, power, and glory; never benevolence or virtue.<sup>21</sup>

### THE ANALYSIS OF ANTIQUITY

The idealised view of America, which was challenged by Adams’s arguments from the so-called “Analysis of Antiquity,” persisted. It was that of a people free of the vices of the Old World, agrarian, egalitarian, simple, pure and virtuous, capable of a form of government for which their corrupt European cousins, by contrast, were hopelessly unsuited. The sense that the American people *must* be better, and that they, as the chosen people, must be capable of that which had eluded others was a significant factor in the refusal to consider Adams’s arguments and predictions and the tendency to denounce them roundly.

In a sense Adams retained some belief in American exceptionalism, despite his critique. He acknowledged that if there was a people who might achieve a virtuous republic free of the political vices, and consequently of the institutions of the Old World, then it was the Americans.<sup>22</sup> However, what he realistically anticipated was lacking in optimism. Only reality could be the basis of government; not wishful

<sup>20</sup> Letter: John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, *Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 1:254.

<sup>21</sup> John Adams, “Discourses on Davila” *Works*, 6:234; “Defence of the Constitutions” [III], *Works*, 5:9-10, 40; Merle Curti, *Human Nature in American Political Thought* (Madison, Wisconsin, 1980), pp.118-9.

<sup>22</sup> Letter: John Adams to James Madison, 17th June 1817, *Works*, 10:268.



thinking, vain hopes, or blind faith. Even if there were people in America capable of the demands of republican virtue and disinterestedness, they were few, and they would diminish in number. Government must be framed to deal with the worst aspects of human nature, the dominant passions, not the occasional, remarkable, virtues.

As Adams puts it, "...The distinction between nature and philosophy is not enough attended to;...nations are actuated by their passions and prejudices."<sup>23</sup> He saw this disregard for the guidance of history in favour of ideologically inspired abstract ideas as the cause of those "inconsistent...erroneous opinions of government"<sup>24</sup> he had fought against during the 1770s in Massachusetts. The sanguine hopes for a republican society without faction, in which men respected the rights of their fellows were refuted by past and present experience.<sup>25</sup>

The reality Adams argued was a condition of two opposed factions, a duality of interests in perpetual conflict, the people as covetous of luxury, and as prone to corruption as their European kinsmen.

There is no man so blind as to see, that to talk of founding a Government upon a supposition that nations and great bodies of men, left to themselves, will practice a course of self-denial, is either to babble like a new born infant, or to deceive like an unprincipled impostor.<sup>26</sup>

Adams's disillusionment with the American character, outlined in the previous chapter, was reinforced by his experience during his sojourn in Europe, during which time he saw what he thought America would become, and the political forms she would inevitably have to have recourse to. He was convinced that government must be founded in nature, a position which determines the future direction and development of this thought. Influenced by the *anglomane* French reformer de Lolme

---

<sup>23</sup> "Defence" [III], *Works*, 6:211.

<sup>24</sup> Letter: John Adams to Richard Price, 20th May 1789, *Works*, 9:559.

and other admirers of the British Constitution “which accommodated perfectly the nature of man”, he argued in defence of “...the old rejected rationale for England’s mixed monarchy”.<sup>27</sup>

The accusation of Anglophilia was founded upon this tendency and his later arguments for the closer emulation of British style of government. This charge, perhaps more than any other, is undeserved, though understandable. As can be seen from his earliest writings,<sup>28</sup> he was an early adherent to the cause, a radical advocate of independence, steadfast defender of American rights, and was sensitive to perceived slights to American honour. At a very early stage he had embraced “Americanism” and the focus of his political theory was to ascertain the best means to strengthen the American Republic.

He claimed no residual affection for England or her King. He wrote, thought and acted for America, wanting to encourage a national character.<sup>29</sup> To this end he was dismayed that patriotism was tainted with Anglo- or Franco-philialia, with “independent, unadulterated, impartial Americanism” displaced.<sup>30</sup> Consequently, he beheld the English faction in the Federalist Party and the Francophiles in the Republican Party with equal loathing. Furthermore he always distrusted Great Britain, suspected her motives, and considered her a “melancholy spectacle...Destitute of

---

<sup>25</sup> “Defence” [III], *Works*, 6:76-100, 135-50.

<sup>26</sup> “Defence” [III], *Works*, 6:62.

<sup>27</sup> Joyce Appleby, *Liberalism and Republicanism in the Historical Imagination* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1992), p.196.

<sup>28</sup> “Dissertation”, (1765), “Instructions to the Representatives of Braintree”, *Works* 4, “Diary and Autobiography”, *Works*, 3.

<sup>29</sup> Letter: John Adams to Dr. Benjamin Rush, July 7th 1805, *The Spur of Fame* (Douglass Adair and John Schutz, San Marino, 1966), pp.29-30.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* p.30.

Wisdom and Virtue...”,<sup>31</sup> anticipating her eventual economic and moral collapse, though not without some misgivings.<sup>32</sup>

Anglophilia, however, must be distinguished from his being an Anglophone, or perhaps more aptly, *Anglomane*, in temperament and thinking. Whilst in London, both he and Abigail warmed to the sense of familiarity in language, customs and even the style of furniture.<sup>33</sup> The peculiarity of his position was remarked upon by Lord Howe at Court who joked that, due only to colonial stubbornness, “...now, we must turn you away among the foreigners.”<sup>34</sup>

His admiration for the true, uncorrupted and as he viewed it, essentially “republican” nature of the British Constitution,<sup>35</sup> which he considered “the most perfect model that has yet been discovered or invented by human genius and experience...”,<sup>36</sup> has been established. On considering post-revolution government in the States, he had “hoped they would be wiser, and preserve the English Constitution in its Spirit and Substance, or as far as the Circumstances of this country required or would admit...”.<sup>37</sup> Indeed his belief in the basic precepts of the British constitution had been the basis for his initial opposition to the English administration.

He did admire England, not least because, as he had been “taught from his cradle,” she was “...the bulwark of the Protestant Religion, and the most important weight in the Balance of power in Europe against France.” He also gloried in a sense

<sup>31</sup> “Autobiography”, *Diary and Autobiography*, 4:149; Letter: John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, December 16th 1816 *Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 2:502.

<sup>32</sup> “Official Papers” *Works*, 8:561-62. During the French Revolutionary Wars he was concerned that, given that Great Britain was besieged in Europe, she might collapse into a wild democracy which might spread to the United States; James R. Sharp, *Politics in the Early Republic: The New Nation in Crisis* (New Haven, 1993), p.172.

<sup>33</sup> “Diary”, *Diary and Autobiography*, 3:148, 150.

<sup>34</sup> “Autobiography”, *Diary and Autobiography*, 3:423.

<sup>35</sup> Letter: John Adams to Roger Sherman; *Works*, 6:428 “England is a republic, a monarchical republic...because the sovereignty, which is the legislative power is vested in more than one man...equally divided between the one, the few, and the many, or in other words, the natural division of mankind in society - the monarchical, the aristocratical and the democratical.”

<sup>36</sup> Letter: John Adams to Samuel Perley, 19th June 1809, *Works*, 9:622; “Defence” [I], *Works*, 4:358.

of Englishness, a concept which, however, he was able to divorce completely from *England* as a nation.<sup>38</sup> His rejection of American exceptionalism<sup>39</sup> in the sense that it was accepted by others was not the rejection of the fundamental aspiration. Whilst he came to disbelieve that Americans were a particularly exceptional people, he did retain for longer a belief that they could be *exceptional Englishmen*, that they could realise and enjoy an uncorrupted British Constitution.

The English nation, for their improvement in the theory of Government, has, at least, more merit with the human race than any other among the moderns...Americans too, ought forever to acknowledge their obligation to English writers, or rather have as good a right to indulge a pride in the recollection of them as the inhabitants of the three Kingdoms.<sup>40</sup>

This was a heritage which not all Americans desired to draw upon. A negative feeling towards all things British prevailed. The propaganda of Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*, so instrumental in dispelling the colonists' former royalism<sup>41</sup> during the Revolution, and the disappointment in King George III's failure to fulfil the ideal of "Patriot King" left the people with a deep suspicion of monarchy, aristocracy and other feudal trappings.<sup>42</sup>

This particular fear of a tyrannical monarchy is demonstrated in the way that the office of Governor was instituted by the "popular" Constitutions in the individual States, where indeed it was established at all.<sup>43</sup> Consistent with his early thought Adams saw the role of the Chief Executive, who was independent and, free of faction, to be a "reservoir of wisdom" at the apex and holding the balance, without which there

---

<sup>37</sup> "Autobiography", *Diary and Autobiography*, 3:254.

<sup>38</sup> His choice for one of the ships in the American fleet: "Alfred", after King Alfred, the Anglo-Saxon King of England, and "founder" of the English Navy.

<sup>39</sup> See Chapter III.

<sup>40</sup> "Defence" [III], *Works*, 6:3.

<sup>41</sup> Edmund S. Morgan, *Birth of the Republic* (Chicago, 1992), p.71; Pauline Maier, *From Resistance to Revolution* (New York, 1991), p.292. Colonial Royalism had been very strong until the Stamp Act, and even after this time was widely indulged in. (Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*, pp.15-17).

<sup>42</sup> Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*, pp.18-20; Edmund S. Morgan, *The Meaning of Independence* (New York, 1978), p.72.

would never be “any stability, dignity, decision, or liberty...”.<sup>44</sup> His proposals for the Massachusetts Constitution gave the Governor an absolute veto, making him an integral part of the legislature, although the convention modified this part of his plan.<sup>45</sup>

Richard Ryerson considers Adams’s readiness to invest a single man with prerogatives similar to those of the British monarch to be symptomatic of his essential monarchism and his admiration for the role of the British monarch in the conferment of civic and military offices.<sup>46</sup> Adams certainly saw merit in this role and his arguments, which were based on the merits of institutions rather than personalities or their historical reputations, were founded upon the need for a strong Governor, with powers similar to the prerogatives of the British monarch, sufficient for the regulation of the aristocracy. However, in the expression of these sentiments, unguarded as he often was in his use of terms, he perhaps misunderstood American society on his return from Europe as much as he himself was misunderstood.

Gordon Wood makes a case for the republicanisation of the British monarchy during the eighteenth century.<sup>47</sup> However the implications of Adams’s interpretation of this relationship, which saw Great Britain and the United States as similarly monarchical republics were not accepted by his critics. His definition was rejected by Roger Sherman who like Adams’s cousin Samuel, believed that hereditary powers were incompatible with a “Republic”, more correctly and exclusively defined as “A

---

<sup>43</sup> Willi Paul Adams, *The First American Constitutions: Republican Ideology and the Making of the State Constitutions in the Revolutionary Era* (Chapel Hill, 1980).

<sup>44</sup> Letter: John Adams to Elbridge Gerry, 4th November 1779, *Works*, 10:506.

<sup>45</sup> Richard A. Ryerson, “Like a Hare Before the Hunters’ John Adams and the Idea of Republican Monarchy”, *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, vol. 107 (1995).

<sup>46</sup> Ryerson, “Like a Hare Before the Hunters”.

<sup>47</sup> Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*, pp.95-109.

Commonwealth without a King,” or more precisely as “dependent upon the public...without any hereditary powers.”<sup>48</sup>

However Adams’s view of a republic was now that of a government “in which the people have, collectively, or by representation, an essential *share* in the sovereignty.”<sup>49</sup> This very notion of a share in sovereignty is indicative of his assumptions about distinct orders in society. Because of this Adams viewed the Federal Constitution as a vindication of his case, since it seemed appropriately founded in the “Orders” created by nature. In a triumphant codicil in the third volume of *Defence* Adams proudly acknowledges the positive influence the first volume had had on the deliberations and his pride that his model for the Massachusetts Constitution had been emulated, particularly the adoption of a bi-cameral system and a division of powers appropriately reflecting social division.<sup>50</sup>

This self-praise is somewhat misplaced: the Federal Constitution, despite its conservative nature, did not represent this coincidence of assumptions on two principal points. Firstly Adams’s own thought, as explained in volume three of the *Defence*, had moved beyond that of the first volumes and was, by his own admission “...the boldest...freest, and the most likely to be unpopular.”<sup>51</sup> Secondly it is by no means clear that an Adamsian sociological or “quasi-feudal” view was accepted as the basis for the structure of the House of Representatives, Senate and President.

The institutional division was not an explicit endorsement of Adams’s view of society. He misunderstood the intended role and nature of the Senate. Whilst social

---

<sup>48</sup> Letter: Roger Sherman to John Adams, 20th July 1789, *Works*, 6:437; John Howe, “Republican Thought and the Political Violence of the 1790s”, *American Quarterly*, 19 (1967), p.153.

<sup>49</sup> Letter: John Adams to Samuel Adams, 18th October 1790, *Works*, 6:415. My emphasis. “Defence” [III], *Works*, 6:183.

<sup>50</sup> “Defence of the Constitutions” [III], *Works*, 6:219; Letter: Dr. Benjamin Rush to John Adams, *Works*, 8:263; Taylor (ed.) in the Introduction to Adams’s draft of the “Massachusetts Constitution” (*The Papers of John Adams* 8:245).

<sup>51</sup> Letter: John Adams to Dr. Benjamin Rush, 2nd December 1788, *Works*, 9:557.

stratification was generally accepted amongst the (constitutional) Federalists and Anti-Federalists alike, *all* the institutions of government were intended and assumed to be representative of the sovereign people.<sup>52</sup> Madison's justification for the Senate as forum for the representation of the States<sup>53</sup> was, it is true, secondary to his initial acceptance that it would represent "property" as the House represented people.<sup>54</sup> However according to Ellenbogen at the time of the Convention he deliberately avoided an Adamsian case for the Senate, and perhaps expunged all reference to such a justification from his record, for practical political reasons.<sup>55</sup> The Anti-Federalists recognised as Adams did the aristocratic faction in society and were suspicious of an aristocratic plot.<sup>56</sup>

Adams did not fully grasp the sense in which the "people" were sovereign, and therefore misunderstood the intention of a broad, sovereign, popular base as fundamental to the "pyramid," which, with the fear, and indeed denial, of the presence of aristocracy, was a fundamental principle of American thought. The political skill and "prudence" of Madison contrasts with a rather more reckless and naïve Adams, too little the practical politician. He was unguarded in the expression of his ideas, and his style promoted misinterpretation.<sup>57</sup>

The Federal Constitution, then, despite the political realism of its recognition of the factional nature of society, still embraces a view of society and of a virtuous people which Adams in volume three dismisses. Because of this Gordon Wood

---

<sup>52</sup> Wood, *Creation of the American Republic*, pp. 586-8; Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment* (Princeton, 1975), p.526; Letter: Roger Sherman to John Adams, 1789, *Works*, 6:437-8.

<sup>53</sup> J.R.Pole, "The Making of the Constitution" *British Essays in American History* (Allen et al. [eds.] London, 1957), p.14; Louis Fisher, "The Efficiency Side of the Separation of Powers", *Journal of American Studies*, Vol. 5 (1971).

<sup>54</sup> This had been the explicit justification for the Senate and the Lower House respectively by the Framers of the Massachusetts Constitution.

<sup>55</sup> Paul D. Ellenbogen, "Another Explanation for the Senate: The Anti-Federalists, John Adams, and the Natural Aristocracy", *Polity* 29, No.2 (Winter 1996).

<sup>56</sup> Ralph Ketcham (ed.), *The Anti-Federalist Papers and the Constitutional Convention Debates* (New York, 1986), pp.231-40.

concludes, in his discussion of the relevancy of John Adams, that, he had “slipped his American Moorings” and fundamentally misunderstood America and the significance of the Federal Constitution, by clinging to the Old World conception of sovereignty.<sup>58</sup> This divergence is best shown by a juxtaposing of the respective positions taken by Adams and Jefferson, their different assumptions and critiques of the proposed Federal Constitution.<sup>59</sup> The political estrangement of these two patriots, once close friends and political allies, while based ostensibly on party political grounds (though neither can be said to exactly personify their respective Parties), had a much deeper cause and reflected on a personal level the political polarisation which occurred during the 1790s. Their break typified the political challenges to the elite consensus exacerbated by the French Revolution.<sup>60</sup> Jefferson had hitherto assumed that they shared the same political principles, and not until their reconciliation in 1812 did they explain more fully their feelings on the issues and definitions which had done so much to divide them in party and personal terms.<sup>61</sup>

During the final decade of the century, in which Adams served as Vice-President and President, speculation on the principles of government continued. Alternative definitions of republicanism and interpretations of the Revolution grew into ideological divisions and conflicts,<sup>62</sup> in an increasingly violent manner.<sup>63</sup> Whereas the Federal Constitution can be said to have superseded Adams’s first two volumes of *Defence*, the third stood as an anticipatory critique of American government and

---

<sup>57</sup> Stewart, *The Opposition Press in the Federalist Era* (New York, 1969), pp.490-1.

<sup>58</sup> Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic* pp.580-1.

<sup>59</sup> Letter: John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, December 6th 1787, *Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 1:213.

<sup>60</sup> J.R.Sharp, “The French Revolution and the Polarisation during the Federalist Era”, *The Politics of the Early Republic*, pp.61-100.

<sup>61</sup> Letter: John Adams to Dr. Benjamin Rush, December 25th 1811, *The Spur of Fame*, pp.201-2.

<sup>62</sup> J.R.Sharp, *Politics in the Early Republic*, pp.69-85, 94-111, Lance Banning, *The Jeffersonian Persuasion* (Ithaca, 1978), pp.127- 38.

<sup>63</sup> Howe, “Republican Thought and the Political Violence of the 1790s”; Sharp, *Politics in the Early Republic*, p.65.



society, and the *Discourses on Davila* which followed it, presented a case for its reform.

“I KNOW OF NO DIFFERENCE BETWEEN JEFFERSON AND MYSELF”<sup>64</sup>

American political life during much of the 1790s was gross and distorted, characterised by heated exaggeration and haunted by conspiratorial fantasy. Events were viewed in apocalyptic terms with the very survival of republican liberty riding in the balance.<sup>65</sup>

The political estrangement of John Adams and Thomas Jefferson represents in personal terms the two great political factions which arose on the collapse of the elite consensus during the 1790s.<sup>66</sup> These tensions were exacerbated by external events, - the French Revolution (1789) and subsequent relations with Great Britain - and caused the rise of the Federalists and Republican-Democrat proto-parties.<sup>67</sup> This party struggle can be loosely characterised in terms of “Aristocrats” against “Democrats”, “Tories” against “Whigs”, as a British faction vying with a French faction, each branding the other as intent on subverting American republicanism.<sup>68</sup> The “High Tone” of the Federalist administration was countered by the Republicans, who cast themselves as the true Whigs of '76, and employed against the administration epithets gleaned from the old “Country” and Radical Whig opposition in England.<sup>69</sup>

In both characterisations there was a little truth: the Republicans did identify with and support Republican France and accordingly attacked Washington’s Proclamation of Neutrality and the later Alien and Sedition Acts (because of both their content, and

<sup>64</sup> Letter: John Adams to Dr. Benjamin Rush, 25th December 1811, *Works*, 10:10.

<sup>65</sup> Howe, “Republican Thought and the Political Violence of the 1790s”, p.150.

<sup>66</sup> Peterson, *Adams and Jefferson* (Oxford, 1978), p.59; J.R.Sharp, *Politics in the Early Republic*, pp.68-76.

<sup>67</sup>Ralph Hetchman, “France and American Politics 1763-1793” *Political Science Quarterly*, 78 (1963);

Morton Borden, *Politics and Parties in the Early Republic* (Arlington Heights, Illinois, 1967), pp.40-55.

the monarchism and un-constitutional centralisation they assumed).<sup>70</sup> The Republicans suspected Adams and the High Federalists of undue attachment to Great Britain, and orchestrated opposition to the supposedly pro-British Jay Treaty of Adams's Administration. The Federalists in general *were* drawn to Great Britain: "the virtue of the English system could be viewed...more dispassionately by Federalists who were no longer rebels...".<sup>71</sup> The degree of attachment varied; High Federalists like Hamilton had always expressed uncritical admiration for the British Constitution,<sup>72</sup> and the Federalist ranks contained former Tories and members of largely loyalist or reluctant "last minute" patriot families.<sup>73</sup>

Neither Adams nor Jefferson truly personified their own parties, as both were essentially moderates. Adams was distrusted by the High Federalist wing of his party, which played its own part in his downfall in 1800. For instance, whilst he agreed in principle with Hamilton's efforts to strengthen American credit abroad, like Jefferson he opposed in detail the financial programme framed by Hamilton. His Puritan background provides something of an explanation for his opposition to the banks and the funded debt which was a major part of Hamilton's scheme.<sup>74</sup>

[Jefferson] disapproved of the 81% loan, and with good reason. For I hated it as much as any man, and the army too, which occasioned it. He disapproved, perhaps, of the partial war with France, which I believed, as far as it proceeded, to be a holy war...We differed in opposition to the French Revolution. He thought it wise and good, and that it would end in the establishment of a free republic. I saw through it, to the end of it before it broke out, and was sure it could end only in a restoration of the Bourbons or a military despotism, after deluging France and Europe in blood...<sup>75</sup>

---

<sup>68</sup> J.R. Sharp, *Politics in the Early Republic*, pp.100-11; Stewart, *The Opposition Press in the Federalists Era*, p.491.

<sup>69</sup> Stewart, *Opposition Press*, pp.491-500; Lance Banning, *The Jeffersonian Persuasion*, pp.128-30.

<sup>70</sup> J.R.Sharp, *Politics in the Early Republic*, p.75.

<sup>71</sup> Morton Borden, *Politics and Parties in the Early Republic*, p.47.

<sup>72</sup> G. Stourzh, *Hamilton and the Idea of Republican Government* (Stanford, 1970); Esmond Wright, "Alexander Hamilton *History Today*, (1) vol. 7 (1957).

<sup>73</sup> Letter: John Adams to Dr. Benjamin Rush, 4th November 1809, *The Spur of Fame*, pp.135-7.

<sup>74</sup> Manning Dauer, "The Political Economy of John Adams", *Political Science Quarterly*, (1) vol. 56 (1941).

<sup>75</sup> Letter: John Adams to Dr. Benjamin Rush, December 25th 1811, *The Spur of Fame*, p.201.

Thus was their difference; this passage indicates the importance of the French Revolution as an issue, in the comprehension of their respective positions. Until Jefferson had read and misunderstood Adams's *Defence* he had assumed they shared the same opinions.<sup>76</sup> Whilst they still agreed on some issues, what divided them was fundamental, and is at base one of disposition, from which was determined their view of America and her people.

"The American republic was almost inexorably drawn into the vortex of the European storm, and this mortally threatened its very existence":<sup>77</sup> the increasingly bloody developments in France and their repercussions dominated American politics during the 1790s. They provided a focal point for the division of the conservative and radical interests, between those men who took the British view that "the French Revolutionaries were bloodthirsty fanatics whose lunacy, unless checked, would destroy the foundations of civilised society" and those with the Francophone view which sympathised with "their heroic efforts...bringing to birth a new order of liberty, equality and fraternity."<sup>78</sup>

In the wake of the French Revolution, radical elements in America, emboldened and inspired by the dramatic events, the egalitarian and the radical populist rhetoric of the Frenchmen, sought to use its example, and its language, to usher in a society more in tune with the spirit of 1776.<sup>79</sup> The people, the new "sovereign lords",<sup>80</sup> railed with increased vigour against artificial distinctions, academic suffixes and appellations of

---

<sup>76</sup>Appleby, "The Jefferson-Adams Rupture and the First Translation of John Adams's 'Defence'", *American Historical Review* vol. 73, (1968). Prof. Appleby speculates that Jefferson may have prevented the publication of a French edition, which he promised to ensure. The French edition issued in 1792 had no connection with Jefferson's initial undertaking.

<sup>77</sup>J.R. Sharp, *American Politics in the Early Republic*, p.70.

<sup>78</sup>Hugh Brogan, *History of the United States of America* (London, 1985), p.258.

<sup>79</sup>Lance Banning, *The Jeffersonian Persuasion*, pp.179-90.

<sup>80</sup>Letter: John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, *Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 2:573.

“rank,” aristocratic pretensions and checks to their will.<sup>81</sup> It encouraged them to complete what they saw an incomplete revolution, a revolution which had been thwarted in its coming to fruition by conservative aristocratic interests.<sup>82</sup>

For Jefferson and his followers France was now a sister republic, an “ideological soul-mate”, whom America should aid if she could. In 1789 Adams predicted dire consequences, considering France “a Goblin Damned.”<sup>83</sup> He does rather overstate his isolation, writing in 1817 that on the outbreak of the Revolution “both houses of Congress, the city of Philadelphia, and all mankind, for I know not one exception glowing with sanguine hope and confident expectations of a Revolution in France...[confident it would] produce a free democratic republic, sister to ours...”.<sup>84</sup> However, his criticism of French democratic thought in the preceding years made him instinctively sceptical of France’s prospects for peace and stable government. Not only was their founding philosophy flawed, hopelessly abstract and contrary, as far as Adams was concerned, to all human history and indeed Revelation itself<sup>85</sup> but furthermore, given that he had doubts about the American capacity to sustain a republic, with “thirty million atheists”<sup>86</sup> and an impoverished and illiterate people, the French attempt was doomed *ab initio*.

The basis of this future divergence between Adams and Jefferson can be appreciated through their respective reactions to the Federal Constitution, which demonstrate their differing views of republicanism, society, and their own Revolution. In a series of letters, part of the prolific correspondence between the

---

<sup>81</sup> Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*, pp.233-6, *Creation of the American Republic*, pp.399-401.

<sup>82</sup> J.R.Sharp, *Politics in the Early Republic*, Ralph Formisano, “Deferential-Participant Politics: the Early Republic’s Political Culture, 1789-1840”, *American Political Science Review* 68 (1974).

<sup>83</sup> Letter: John Adams to Thomas McKean, 2nd July 1817, *Works*, 10:16.

<sup>84</sup> Letter: John Adams to John Jackson, 30th December 1817, *Works*, 10:270.

<sup>85</sup> “Defence” [III], *Works*, 6:6, Letter: John Adams Dr. Richard Price, 19th April 1790, *Works*, 9:564.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid*.

Adams family in London and Jefferson in Paris, they shared their reflections upon the new model of government for their country.

Adams's basic satisfaction that the balance had been ensured, and that the model was close to that of the Massachusetts Constitution has already been shown. Adams supported the nationalistic intent of the new Constitution; indeed he feared the Federal compromise would diminish the potential advantages possible by dividing sovereignty, therefore sapping the strength of the whole, rendering it unable to contend with the demands of international state-craft.<sup>87</sup>

Jefferson was a less committed nationalist;<sup>88</sup> further, he expressed regret to Adams that such a complete departure from the spirit of the Articles of Confederation, the weakness of which the Federal Constitution was intended to remedy, had been considered necessary.<sup>89</sup> It was not democratic enough for him, government was too remote from the people and, despite the absence of an absolute veto, the proposed President was in his view too powerful and too independent.

Adams did not share Jefferson's fear that, because there was no limit to his reelection, the President would in effect be "a bad edition of a Polish King". Rather, Adams considered him too weak in relation to the "aristocratic" Senate and saw a virtue in such a "continuation". Here he appears to be perhaps more concerned with the "end", that is stability, than with a principled commitment to the "means".

---

<sup>87</sup> Letter: John Adams to Richard Price, 19th April 1790, *Works*, 9:564-5; John Adams to Thomas Jefferson December 6th 1787, *The Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 1:214.

<sup>88</sup> The opposition to the Federalists which arose, the Republican Party, of which Jefferson became leader, championed States Rights. The most explicit claim in this period perhaps came with the Virginia and Kentucky Resolutions (1798), and in the themes of opposition to the Proclamation of Neutrality and the Alien and Sedition Act, which the Republican Democrats claimed were *ultra vires*. Lance Banning in *The Jeffersonian Persuasion* discusses the extent to which the Republicans were heirs to the Anti-Federalists. Certainly many themes recurred and the tone employed by the more radical elements against the Federalist Administration can be said to be linked to and based in "the plebeian populist [opposition] to aristocracy", which was an aspect of Anti-Federalism. (Saul Cornell, "Aristocracy Assailed: The Ideology of Back-country Anti-Federalism", *Journal of American History*, No. 76 vol. 4 March 1990).

You are apprehensive the President, when once chosen, will be chosen again and again as long as he lives. So much the better as it appears to me. - You are apprehensive of foreign Interference, Intrigue, Influence. So am I. - But as often as Elections happen, the danger of foreign Influence recurs. The less frequently they happen the less danger. - And if the Same Man may be chosen again as it is probable he will be...the danger of foreign influence will be less.<sup>90</sup>

This was anathema to Jefferson's understanding of the Revolution. For him, the participation of the people was a good in itself. More than just the rejection of British rule, his Revolution represented a revolution in the principles of government, a new departure founded upon the idea that America could and would become a free republic established upon a fundamental aversion to any similar monarchic or aristocratic institutions.<sup>91</sup>

Accordingly Jefferson derided Adams's efforts to confer a suitably monarchic title upon an unwilling Washington (who regarded his pose of dignified aloofness as sufficiently regal whilst suitably republican).<sup>92</sup> Adams's "Titles Campaign" in the first days of his Vice-Presidency, "before his bags were unpacked",<sup>93</sup> further established his reputation as a "royalist at heart,"<sup>94</sup> and required his explicit declaration of "attachment" and "veneration" for the Federal Constitution in his Inaugural Address.<sup>95</sup> Hutson suggests that Adams's apologists in the past have dismissed these efforts as at best an amusing episode, or at worst a curious aberration.<sup>96</sup>

To Jefferson these efforts were simply absurd, the age of rank and rigid hierarchy having been displaced by a society founded on merit and equality. The new American

---

<sup>89</sup> Letter: Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, 13th November, 1787 *Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 1:212; Peterson, *Adams and Jefferson* pp.39-40.

<sup>90</sup> Letter: John Adams to Thomas Jefferson December 6th 1787, *Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 1:214.

<sup>91</sup> Peterson, *Adams and Jefferson: A Revolutionary Dialogue*, p.84.

<sup>92</sup> John Ferling, *John Adams*, pp.302-4.

<sup>93</sup> James H. Hutson, "John Adams' Titles Campaign" *New England Quarterly* 41, (1968), p.30; Page Smith, *John Adams* (New York, 1962), pp.747-9.

<sup>94</sup> Letters exchanged between John Adams and Charles Holt, *Works*, 10:292.

<sup>95</sup> John Adams "Inaugural Address", James D. Richardson (ed.), *A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents 1789-1897* (New York, 1897-1917), 1:231.

<sup>96</sup> James H. Hutson, "John Adams' Titles Campaign", p.37

society was free of such social division, the individual had been emancipated from such restraints to the realisation of their individual potential. Jefferson's role in the abolition of entail,<sup>97</sup> and in establishing the provision for the freedom of religion in Virginia, typify his attitude to the liberation of the individual, particularly from hereditary restraints. Unlike Adams he relished change: "I like a little rebellion now and again, it is like a storm in the Atmosphere."<sup>98</sup> In Virginia he had proposed the generational expiration of laws to ensure that the next generation were not bound by the laws of their predecessors, unless they expressly chose to be so.<sup>99</sup>

Hence, Adams and Jefferson found no particular sympathy between their assumptions and views, little trace of the meeting of minds they had experienced in the Continental Congress before independence. Adams attempted to encapsulate their difference by suggesting that whilst he was "afraid of the few" Jefferson was afraid of the "one."<sup>100</sup> This further demonstrates Wood's claim that there was a fundamental misunderstanding between them, as Adams realised when he admitted that although they both use the same terms they meant very different things by them.<sup>101</sup>

Jefferson was indeed wary of a strong executive power. The precise difference between himself and Adams in this respect can be understood by comparing their respective Draft Constitutions for Virginia and Massachusetts. In his "Draught of a Fundamental Constitution",<sup>102</sup> Jefferson had expressly prevented the new "servant" Governor from exercising the key integrated legislative role and from enjoying an independent position, as a "Distinct Order", which was Adams's ideal. In Virginia,

<sup>97</sup>"Draught of a Fundamental Constitution", (1783), Thomas Jefferson *Notes on the State of Virginia* (ed. William Peden) (1982), pp.110-130.

<sup>98</sup> Letter: Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, February 6th 1787, *Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 1:175.

<sup>99</sup> Matthews, *The Radicalism of Thomas Jefferson*, pp.27-32.

<sup>100</sup> Letter: John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, December 6th 1787, *Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 1:213.

<sup>101</sup> Letter: John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, November 15th, 1813, *Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 2:397.

<sup>102</sup> "Draught of a Fundamental Constitution" (1783), Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, pp.110-130.

the legislature's power and authority is paramount and is dealt with first in the Constitution. The Governor, who is limited to one term in this model, has clear limits to his power:

By executive powers, we mean no reference to those powers exercised under our former government by the crown as of its prerogatives, nor that these should be the standard of what may or may not be deemed the rightful powers of the governor....<sup>103</sup>

Adams objected to the Federal Senate's role in the appointment of offices, preferring a Privy Council "of his own creation" to assist the President.<sup>104</sup> In contrast Jefferson preferred for the Virginia Constitution a body more regulatory and assertive than Adams's Privy Council. His "Council of State" composed by joint ballot of both houses, for a term two years longer than the Governor, has a "duty...to attend and advise the governor when called on by him...They shall have the power, and it shall be their duty to meet at their own will, and give their advice, though not required by the Governor, in cases where they shall think the public good calls for it..."<sup>105</sup>

Adams's justification for the strong Executive which he claimed was needed "as the indispensable guardian" of the people's rights,<sup>106</sup> to maintain the balance between the aristocracy and democracy in society, went against the popular aversion to executive power which still endured. It was rejected by Jefferson's view of society which precluded such diverse antagonistic interests in America, and, therefore, the need for a third countervailing force. Jefferson's conception of aristocracy was one based on an equality between all men and which reflected positively upon their character. The old European style aristocracy, what he saw as the artificial

---

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid*, Article II.

<sup>104</sup> Letter: John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, December 6th, 1787, *Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 1:203.

<sup>105</sup> Article II (b) p. 215.

<sup>106</sup> "Defence" [III], *Works*, 4:579.



aristocracy, created and maintained by civil laws, had no basis in America.<sup>107</sup> The natural aristocracy, “a gift from God”, would be recognised in a just republican government which would enable the people to recognise and select the *aristoi* to rule over them.<sup>108</sup> The natural aristocracy, reflecting the same principle shown in the abolition of entail, would not perpetuate the office in a few families; power would be entrusted on merit, for as long as it was deserved.

Adams never denied the right of the people to choose the form of government they wished.<sup>109</sup> However his view of society and particularly the roots of the inevitable American aristocracy he predicted differed from Jefferson's.<sup>110</sup> His conception of aristocracy was more old fashioned, more entrenched, less transient in that its foundation was in the base human passions rather than enlightened rationality. He saw it as an inevitable social phenomenon in all kinds of society and from the nature of its origin as naturally hereditary.

### THE ROLE OF AN AMERICAN ARISTOCRACY

Part of Taylor's argument against Adams's case for an American aristocratic role was that America lacked a suitably cohesive or definable aristocratic interest or faction. The traditional props of hereditary aristocracy, a concentration of property and a strong feudal ethos, were absent. Adams continued not only to argue for the inevitability of aristocracy and to describe its origins and manifestation in America, but to claim that its recognition and regulation was as essential to liberty as the popular assembly.

---

<sup>107</sup> Letter: Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, October 28th, 1813 *Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 2:388.

<sup>108</sup> Letter: Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, October 28th, 1813 *Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 2:388-9.

<sup>109</sup> Letter: John Adams to Roger Sherman, 1789, *Works*, 6:428-29.

Madison saw multifarious, transient, and conflicting interests operating in a pluralist system, through which he wished to prevent the formation of vested interests which could dominate one or other branch of government. He accepted in *The Federalist* that the seeds of faction are in the very nature of man.<sup>111</sup> Conversely Adams saw a duality of interests, likewise from the nature of man, but which were enduring.

Adams develops, most explicitly in the *Discourses on Davila*,<sup>112</sup> a definition of aristocracy based on influence over others. He described the five traditional pillars of this influence, "Beauty, Wealth, Birth, Genius and Virtues", and said that they were as present in America as they were in any other human society. For Jefferson increased knowledge would destroy old-style aristocracy. In the new empire of rationality and enlightenment only the last two "pillars" would be of consequence, and he dismissed as insignificant any enduring influence from concerns of family and birth.<sup>113</sup> Adams admitted that "there is a voice within us, which seems to intimate, that real merit should govern the world and that men ought to be respected only in proportion to their talents...".<sup>114</sup> However, he observed that in reality "any one of the...first [three pillars] can at any time overbear any one or both of the two last...".<sup>115</sup>

This propensity in men is founded in human nature and is as ineradicable as the natural inequality which it represents. Adams dismisses the French claims of natural equality or egalitarianism, believing that "...all [men are] born to equal rights, but to very different fortunes; to very different success and influence in life." Similarly he

---

<sup>110</sup> Jefferson's most explicit opinions on the nature of aristocracy was expressed in his letters to John Adams during 1813-14. *Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 2:387-438.

<sup>111</sup> James Madison, *The Federalist* No. 10. (London, 1996).

<sup>112</sup> Published in the first year of his Vice-Presidency, as a series of letters in the *Federalist Gazette of the United States*. He considered it a fourth volume to his *Defence*. These letters were written in response to Condorcet's *Four Letters of a Citizen of New Haven*.

<sup>113</sup> Letter: Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, 28th October 1813, *Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 2:389.

<sup>114</sup> "Discourses on Davila", *Works*, 6:251.

attacks their bold declarations and decrees aimed at eradicating all distinctions and inequality between men.<sup>116</sup>

For this reason he considered the French attempts to eradicate the titled aristocracy as a futile and horrific endeavour, since aristocrats were not defined by titles, but rather titles and honours were just one visible manifestation of what already existed. Therefore a new aristocracy would arise in France, like a “Phoenix from the Flames,”<sup>117</sup> because natural inequality creates unequal influence, differences between people create divisions in society and thereby a “natural aristocracy.”

The human trait of admiration and emulation of others and the desire for admiration from others is based, Adams claims, on a longing for distinction, distinction craved equally by all men, “savage and civilised”, in plain republics or within the smallest social unit as much as in any established monarchy.<sup>118</sup> Adams found that men are driven by certain “passions, prejudices and faculties”, the principal passion being the desire for recognition and distinction:

[In any]...family...neighbourhood...school...club...village, the bar or the Exchange, a camp or court. Wherever men, women or children are to be found...old, young, rich or poor, high or low, wise or foolish, ignorant or learned, every individual is actuated by a desire to be seen, hear, talked of, approved and respected by the people about him and within his own knowledge.<sup>119</sup>

These passions are not rational, but they nevertheless determine human motives for their actions, choices and political behaviour. Even benevolence is often motivated by these same desires. It is a trait which cannot be eradicated or legislated

<sup>115</sup> Letter: John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, 2nd September 1813, *Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 2:371.

<sup>116</sup> Letter: John Adams to John Taylor, July 1814, *Works*, 6:452.

<sup>117</sup> John Adams, Marginalia in Mary Wollstonecraft's "A History and Progress of the French Revolution" (ed.) Zoltan Haraszti, *John Adams and the Prophets of Progress*, pp.188, 201; letter: John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, December 19th, 1813, *Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 2:408; J.W. Cooke, "The Fragile Balance: John Adams on Liberty and Equality", *Modern Age*, No. 3 vol. 37, (1995), p.454.

<sup>118</sup> "Discourses on Davila", *Works*, 6:241.

<sup>119</sup> "Discourses on Davila", *Works*, 6:233 .

away, nor is it subject to significant amelioration through republican maturity, conditions or education. It is a desire satisfied never by argument or reason, but through achievements, wealth, family records, and recognised and valued by others in such terms.<sup>120</sup>

The “aristocratic influence” which is thus created, possessed initially by individuals, then their families, and ultimately their descendants, creates an entrenched and hereditary faction or interest. Attention to birth is inevitable,<sup>121</sup> and is the most powerful cause of aristocratic influence; a name like Winthrop in New England or Randolph of Roanoke in Virginia is as noble in America as Howard or Russell in England.<sup>122</sup> What is most important is that “a name” attracts “the notice of mankind, the attention of mankind” more than a Star or Garter.<sup>123</sup>

Whilst he continued to doubt the strictly scientific basis of genealogy,<sup>124</sup> he had confidence that a combination of inherited privilege and sense of family honour would ensure that influence and virtue would descend through the centuries. Birth, virtue and fortune, which is a secondary pillar but important again for the reason that it attracts attention and admiration,

...forms a body of men which contains the greatest collection of virtues and abilities in a free government, it is the brightest ornament and glory of the nation and may always be made the greatest blessing of society if it be judiciously managed in the constitution. But if this is not done, it is always the most dangerous, nay it may be added, it never fails to be the destruction of the commonwealth.<sup>125</sup>

<sup>120</sup> “Discourses”, *Works*, 6:249; Letter: Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, October 28th, 1813, *Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 2:389.

<sup>121</sup> “Discourses”, *Works*, 6:236-9, 269-71; “Taylor Letters”, *Works*, 6:496-507; Letter: John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, 19th December 1813, *Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 2:406-409.

<sup>122</sup> Letter: John Adams to John Taylor; “Review of the Hillhouse Proposition”, *Works*, 6:529.

<sup>123</sup> “Discourses”, *Works*, 6:235-7; “Defence” [III], *Works*, 6:185-6.

<sup>124</sup> “Discourses”, *Works*, 6:236.

<sup>125</sup> “Defence” [III], *Works*, 6:139.

The central ambiguity in Adams's regard for the aristocracy is that he sees it both as a dangerous faction in society which must be controlled, and as a source of immense benefits. To Jefferson he claimed to be afraid of the few, and indeed to a certain extent he remained so, particularly with regard to the "aristocracy of wealth" which, unchecked, was fast forming in America, having been created in part by Hamilton's banking system. Yet he became much *more* afraid and distrustful of the people, and vested increasing faith in the greater aristocratic interest as a whole.

The social background and ardent Revolutionary role of this "Atlas of Independence" rendered him an implausible aristocrat, as he was an improbable Anglophile. He had no proud aristocratic lineage, indeed he was proud of his simple forebears of virtuous yeoman stock.<sup>126</sup> He had not the dynastic connections, nor the aristocratic life-style or estate of a Washington, a Madison or a Jefferson.<sup>127</sup>

However, the ardour of his youthful sniping at the aristocratic pretensions of the "Monopolising families", the Hutchinson junta and the "dons, the bashaws, the grandees, the patricians, the sachems, [or] the nabobs..." of New England cooled over time.<sup>128</sup> Morse describes this second period of his thought, in which he wrote the *Defence and Discourses on Davila*, as one of the championing "of the aristocratic interest against the encroaching disposition of the democracy...to the further exposition and defence of his system."<sup>129</sup> Whilst it might indeed seem that way, since he was increasingly distressed at the degree to which the pendulum was swinging to

<sup>126</sup> "Autobiography", *Diary and Autobiography*, 3:254; Letter: John Adams to Hannah Adams, *Works*, 9:575.

<sup>127</sup> His ancestry was more distinguished than he knew; he was a descendant of the Hon. John Alden, (1599-1687) who arrived on the *Mayflower*, and was related to many of the distinguished New England families, including the Peabodys, Endicotts and Boylston. Of a more distant nature, he was a 22nd cousin of Thomas Jefferson, 19th of George Washington, and 27th (appropriately removed) each for Presidents Franklin D. Roosevelt and George H.W. Bush. *Burkes Presidential Families* (London, 1973), *Burkes Landed Gentry of the British Empire*, "American Supplement" (London, 1939).

<sup>128</sup> Letter: John Adams to Patrick Henry, 3rd June 1776, *Works*, 9:388.

<sup>129</sup> A.D.Morse, "The Politics of John Adams", *American Historical Review* 1, vol. 4 (1899), p.311.

the popular side, a critique of American democracy cannot be directly equated with a championing or endorsement of aristocracy. He is describing reality and is still, and always remains, suspicious, describing aristocratic factions in negative and resigned, though objective terms. He continues to stress the need to “ostracise” the aristocratic faction, and in part the motive behind his Titles campaign was to overawe the Senate with the status of the President.<sup>130</sup>

From 1789 however the change in tone is discernible, reflecting the trauma induced by the French Revolution and its manifestation in domestic politics. In the *Discourses* the ideal Senate of ostracised aristocrats is seen as a “haven”<sup>131</sup> or “asylum” as well as a cage, and its members a blessing.<sup>132</sup>

To his cousin, whom he conscientiously addresses, contrary to the subject’s disposition, as “His Honour” Samuel Adams, Lieutenant-Governor of Massachusetts, he pleads the aristocratic cause:

Blind undistinguished reproaches against the aristocratic part of mankind, a division which nature has made, and we cannot abolish, are neither pious nor benevolent. They are as pernicious as they are false. They serve only to foment prejudice, jealousy, envy, animosity, and malevolence. They serve no ends but those of sophistry, fraud, and the spirit of party. It would not be true, but it would be more egregiously false, to say that the people have waged everlasting war against the rights of man.<sup>133</sup>

Such reproaches, which Adams dismisses as “commonplace cant”,<sup>134</sup> were part of the opposition rhetoric. After the French Revolution the Democratic Clubs were

<sup>130</sup> Hutson, “John Adams’ Titles Campaign”, pp.34-6. One of his ideas was *His Highness the President of the United States of America, and the Protector of the Rights of the Same*, or at the very least “Highness” or “Most Benign Highness.” (Ferling, *Adams*, p.302). Abigail Adams, loyal as ever, insisted on referring to George Washington as “His Majesty.” (Page Smith, *John Adams*, 2:770).

<sup>131</sup> J.W.Cooke, “The Fragile Balance”; “Discourses on Davila”, *Works*, 6:395.

<sup>132</sup> John Adams, marginal note in Mary Wollstonecraft’s *History of the French Revolution*, in Zoltan Haraszti *John Adams and the Prophets of Progress*, p.211; “Discourses”, *Works*, 6:394-5.

<sup>133</sup> “Discourses”, *Works*, 6:395; Letter: John Adams to Samuel Adams, 18th October 1790, *Works*, 6:417.

<sup>134</sup> John Adams, marginal note in Mary Wollstonecraft’s *History of the French Revolution*, in Zoltan Haraszti, *John Adams and the Prophets of Progress*, pp.201.

suspected of spreading Jacobin propaganda, and Washington and other “aristocrats” were the subject of mock executions by guillotine.<sup>135</sup>

Whilst Samuel, unconvinced, doubts the merits of an institutionalised aristocratic faction,<sup>136</sup> John presses the claim and cites instances in history where the aristocracy have been “...a civil and political militia,...defending their own rights, liberties and properties...in common cause with the people.”<sup>137</sup>

Regulation was still essential, to guard against the vices whilst availing society of the virtues of aristocrats,<sup>138</sup> and this was the secondary reason Adams had for his advocacy of a Precedence of Titles. They would facilitate the ostracism of the aristocracy, by setting them below the President.<sup>139</sup> Further they would enhance the status of the “National Government” over the States, and appeal to the passion for distinction whilst engendering a sense of identification with and duty toward the new government.<sup>140</sup>

His time in Europe, as an embarrassingly plain republican Minister at Court, had taught him the practical benefits of titles in legitimising government in the eyes of the people and, importantly, other nations.<sup>141</sup> At Versailles he remarked upon the pomp and circumstance; “These Ceremonies and Shows may be condemned by Philosophy and ridiculed by Comedy, with great reason.”<sup>142</sup> Nevertheless he recognised their value, indeed their essential role in government: “I do not abhor titles, nor the pageantry of Government. If I did, I should abhor Government itself for there never

<sup>135</sup> J.R. Sharp, *Politics in the Early Republic*, pp.181-2.

<sup>136</sup> Letter: Samuel Adams to John Adams, 4th October 1790, *Works*, 6:413.

<sup>137</sup> Letter: John Adams to Samuel Adams, 18th October 1790, *Works*, 6:417.

<sup>138</sup> “Defence” [III], 6:86-105, 183-6; “Discourses”, *Works*, 6:250-3.

<sup>139</sup> Hutson, “John Adams’ Titles Campaign”, pp.37-8; “Review of the Hillhouse Plan” *Works*, 6:530.

<sup>140</sup> Hutson, “John Adams’ Titles Campaign”, pp.36-8.

<sup>141</sup> Adams wrote to Mr. Bonfield instructing him on the Diplomatic Protocol, his acute embarrassment amongst the many titled European Diplomats, and his wish to be addressed “on all letters, packets, bundle, case, and casks...A Son Excellence, Monsieur John Adams, Ministre Plenipotentiaire des etas unis De L’Amerique, Hotel de Valois, Ruë de Richelieu a Paris.” (Letter: John Adams to John Bonfield, *Papers of John Adams*, 9:340-1).

was, and never will be, because there never can be a government without titles and pageantry, not a school not a college, not a club can be governed without them."<sup>143</sup>

These arguments offended the republican sensibilities of his critics in the House and Senate, to whom they seemed dangerous.<sup>144</sup> However Adams never claims that titles are desirable for their own sake, nor even that they are compatible with the popular republican ideal. In this respect his campaign and his arguments for the further imitation of British forms is a reflection upon the people, whom he now thinks are sufficiently corrupt and un-republican as to require, in the absence of virtue, these European forms to regulate their passions.<sup>145</sup> The challenge which Adams now addressed was not whether hereditary aristocracy is compatible with republicanism, which he believed it was, but whether American republicanism could survive without it.

Essentially, from the third volume of *Defence* in which he undertook a critique of Democracy and elections, he was increasingly driven to view the aristocracy as the source of stability and as a bulwark for liberty against the rapacious democracy. He develops a greater fear of the people, and attempts to refute the "Cult of the people" which was developed from the radical aspects of the American Revolution and exacerbated by the radical French example.<sup>146</sup>

<sup>142</sup> "Autobiography", *Diary and Autobiography*, 3:133.

<sup>143</sup> Letter: John Adams to Benjamin Rush, *The Spur of Fame*; "Diary", July 25th 1756. He further remarks "it is of consequence to society that ranks and subordination should be established in it, it is of consequence that the titles denoting those ranks should not be confounded...yeoman and gentlemen." "Diary", *Diary and Autobiography*, 1:37.

<sup>144</sup> Hutson, "John Adams' Titles Campaign", p.37; Stewart, *Opposition Press*, pp.484-50.

<sup>145</sup> Hutson, "John Adams' Titles Campaign", p.38; "Discourses", *Works*, 6:248.

<sup>146</sup> J.R.Sharp, *Politics in the Early Republic*, pp.81-87.





The actual character of a democratic people is the subject of considerable Adams vitriol. In the third volume of the *Defence*<sup>147</sup> he discounts Nedham's assurances that the "people" are more pure and frugal than an aristocracy, that when in power they will respect the rights of other men.<sup>148</sup> All men, being of "the same clay", are driven by a passion for their own interests, not for virtue.<sup>149</sup> He dismisses de Montesquieu's claims that the "love of democracy is that of equality". Reflecting upon the decline in standards, the lack of deference and the envious nature and levelling tendencies of the "many", he concludes that there is no love of equality in men: they do not wish their neighbours to rise to their level, but rather, they want those above them to be brought down to theirs.<sup>150</sup> The rich, always a minority, have rights too,<sup>151</sup> and unless they are provided with a bulwark against the ravages of democracy, no property will ever be safe. The legislative power would become a "weapon of vengeance" in the hands of the poor.<sup>152</sup> The levelling passion is insatiable:

The idle, the vicious, the intemperate would rush to the utmost extravagance of debauchery, sell and spend all their share, and then demand a new division of those who purchased from them. The moment that the idea is admitted into society that property is not as sacred as the laws of God and that there is not a force of law and public justice to protect it, anarchy and tyranny commence.<sup>153</sup>

Because of this passion, the character of a democratic people renders elections ever less reliable selectors of meritorious people. Thomas Jefferson, in contrast, had made the selection of the natural *Aristoi* the basis of his faith in democratic

---

<sup>147</sup> Despite ostensibly being part of the rebuttal to Turgot, the third volume is entirely given over to an "incisive and pungent" criticism of *The Excellency of a Free State* by Marchmont Nedham, originally published in 1656, and republished in 1787. Nedham attempted to defend simple, democratic government in the same ways Adams' considered Turgot had; indeed Adams speculates that Turgot obtained his ideas from Nedham.

<sup>148</sup> "Defence" [III], *Works*, 6:6, 185.

<sup>149</sup> "Discourses", *Works*, 6:232.

<sup>150</sup> "Defence" [III], *Works*, 6:6.

<sup>151</sup> "Defence" [III], *Works*, 6:65.

<sup>152</sup> "Defence" [III], *Works*, 6:66.

<sup>153</sup> "Defence" [III], *Works*, 6:69; Letter: John Adams to James Madison, 17th June 1817, *Works*, 10:268.

government, a faith shared by Madison.<sup>154</sup> In reflecting upon the experience of practical politics, Adams regards election results as no longer indicative of rational choice made in favour of virtue.

Unsullied honour, sterling integrity, real virtue, stand very unequal chance against the lies, slanders and bribery, of the candidate who has fewest scruples.<sup>155</sup>

Elections had become inlets for corruption, rather than the bulwark against it. Rather than securing virtuous servants for the public good, the apathy and ignorance of the electorate allowed demagogues to gain power and exercise it for their own advantage. Whereas he had previously anticipated increased democratic responsibility, by the turn of the century he saw only progress in “the great arts of lying and libelling...”.<sup>156</sup> The common good had become sacrificed to party and sectional interests, all aspects of government and other institutions in society had become tainted with party patronage and partisan influence had infected the press, “the Bar and the clergy.”<sup>157</sup>

Thus it is Adams’s case that these ramifications are an abrogation of the republican ideal, demonstrating again for Adams that the hopes of republican government are thwarted by the democratic character. In sum the passions which motivate men render elections tumultuous and antithetical to the virtuous outcome they were intended to produce. In addition, at the level of national politics, where the stakes are higher and the rewards of office potentially greater, the motivation for bribery - the political machinations which Adams himself was subject to - is greater and therefore more damaging.

---

<sup>154</sup> Letter: Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, October 28th 1813, *Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 2:389.

<sup>155</sup> “Defence of the Constitutions” [III], *Works*, 6:51; “Discourses”, *Works*, 6:237-8; Letter: John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, September 2nd 1813, *Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 2:370-2.

<sup>156</sup> Letter: John Adams to Dr. Benjamin Rush, September 19th 1806, *Spur of Fame*, p.66.

<sup>157</sup> “Defence” *Works*, 6:67-59.

The increasingly ideological dimension to the electoral contests of the 1790s bears out Adams's concerns of the 1780s, and led to his opposition to annual elections and rotation, procedures he had once fully supported.<sup>158</sup> The frequency of annual elections converts the whole year into a "scene of faction and intrigue", whilst rotation "is a violation of the rights of mankind; it is an abridgement of the rights of the electors and candidates," by which a fool would be elected "by default."<sup>159</sup> From this point Adams is concerned, as a natural development of this critique, with the limitation of these factious events. Elections were no longer the surest means of achieving the republican objective, therefore alternative means had to be adopted.

In a society so lacking in virtue as a basis, the essence of a lasting republic must be vested in her "regulatory institutions". The logic of Adams's thought thus far provides the justification for the institutions best suited to achieve this. He looks to history, and in *Davila* concludes by attributing Europe's greatness to her having wisely

united all their institutions - connected lands, offices and families, made them all descend together, and honour, public attention and congratulation along with them."<sup>160</sup>

Whilst he does continue to maintain his disdain for hereditary "honours, offices, emoluments established by law", wishing to excluded them from America "as long as possible", there is a certain fatalism about his outlook. He predicts the need will arise, that Americans like "all mankind" before them have found "no remedy against corruption in elections to offices of great power except by making them hereditary."<sup>161</sup>

The introduction of such institutions is, for Adams, an inevitable if regrettable innovation, demanded by his understanding of political science, and it is, he

---

<sup>158</sup> "Thoughts" (1776), *Works*, 4:196.

<sup>159</sup> "Defence" [III], *Works*, 6:53.

<sup>160</sup> "Discourses", *Works*, 6:250-252.

<sup>161</sup> Letter: John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, November 15th 1813, *Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 2:401.

maintains, compatible with the republican ideal. In so far as he considers republicanism to mean anything, he had stripped it down to its essentials. His priority is the common good, and how this can be achieved. Within a balanced constitution with a popular branch it matters not whether the other branches are hereditary or elective: "the people, the nation, in whom all power resides originally, may delegate it in fee simple or fee taile...or during good behaviour, or at will, or till further orders."<sup>162</sup>

Thus, whilst maintaining the fundamental role of the people in choosing the form of government which best suits their needs, he anticipates that in time a hereditary element will be introduced as an expedient "lesser evil":

Mankind have universally discovered that chance was preferable to corrupt choice and have trusted providence rather than themselves. First Magistrates and Senators had better be made hereditary at once than that the people should be universally debauched and bribed, go to loggerheads and fly into arms regularly every year.<sup>163</sup>

His reluctance remained. This is a negative philosophy and his conclusions are a sorrowful indictment of society and a gloomy prediction of a future characterised by "great degrees of wealth, luxury, dissipation, and...profligacy of manners". It is not an enthusiastic justification for hereditary orders, but an admission that, in the absence of "frugality, simplicity, and moderation" in society, they will inevitably be grasped at as a solution to effect more exactly the balance he sees as essential, "to make human life tolerable."<sup>164</sup>

This final analysis, the nadir of his disillusionment and his alienation from society, is idealistic despite itself, based on a view which is as dogmatic and ideological as that which he rejects. Ultimately his faith rests with "Providence", with

---

<sup>162</sup> Letter: John Adams to Roger Sherman, *Works*, 6:429.

<sup>163</sup> "Defence" [III], *Works*, 6:34.

<sup>164</sup> "Defence" [III], *Works*, 6:96.

an institutionalised aristocratic class, which he admits is potentially oligarchic, yet upon which he relies to exercise through successive generations a sense of duty and *noblesse oblige*. His doubts remain, necessitating a virtuous “Patriot King” to ensure the equilibrium, free of the vices which pervade the rest of society and able to secure the common good through his own disinterested leadership. It is a role which Adams played in 1800, defying his party, and almost certainly sacrificing his political career to prevent a war with France which would have led to the break up of the Union.

CHAPTER V

*Lamentations*

You my friend have been hurt by your country: so have I. We have sacrificed our lives, our families, our popularity, our Reputations, our Pleasures our Comforts to the Public...<sup>1</sup>

The 1790s further justified Adams's sociological foundation for the trinity of government institutions. He presented a view of America as essentially indistinguishable from Europe but for differences in maturity and a well developed antipathy in America to the ways of that continent fostered and perpetuated by the spirit of the age. He had sought refuge in a controlled, countervailing aristocratic balance, but this faith is not consistently held throughout the last quarter century of his life. He is a man ill at ease with the nineteenth century.

Adams entered retirement not without some relief, yet spent years brooding, arguing about his ideas, and defending his record as President and as a pivotal figure of the Revolution. He fought hard to explain and justify himself, but he did have an appreciation of the extent of his estrangement from American thought. He considered himself "in enemy country" and there is much to support Gordon Wood's view that his works were an anomaly and his thought obsolete and irrelevant.<sup>2</sup> This characterisation deals not just with the eccentricity of his ideas, nor the implications of, or reactions to, them discussed in previous chapters, but with his whole attitude and method of thinking. He essentially misdiagnosed the threats to American liberty, and therefore his subsequent reasoning is largely irrelevant.

---

<sup>1</sup> Letter: John Adams to Elbridge Gerry, April 26th 1813, *The Warren-Adams Letters* (Massachusetts Historical Society Collections 72-73, Boston, 1917-1925), 2:381.

<sup>2</sup> Gordon Wood, "The Relevance and Irrelevance of John Adams", *The Creation of the American Republic* (Chapel Hill, 1969, 1998), pp.567-592.

This view is part of Wood's argument that in many important respects the post-Revolutionary Adams is an irrelevancy, that he misunderstood the implications of the Revolution and of American republicanism, and the remarkably popular basis of the (whole) Constitutional structure.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps then, Adams *had* been trapped in his "English" analysis, unduly influenced by the social strife in Massachusetts and a victim of "weak optics" which had caused him to be dazzled by the royal courts of Europe and turned into a monarchist. This is Mercy Otis Warren's view, as she asserted in her *History of the American Revolution* (1805) - a work which he, in turn, found flawed, partisan, and most misrepresentative of his role and political theory.<sup>4</sup> It is ironic, in view of this claim, that Adams blamed Hamilton's misunderstanding of the American character on his not being a "native" American.<sup>5</sup>

His classical analysis, perhaps simplistic in its application,<sup>6</sup> was, it is argued, refuted by events. According to Wood, despite his astuteness he could not comprehend the arguments against him: "It was as if Adams was speaking a language different from that of other Americans."<sup>7</sup> He was too old to learn a new language; rather he continued to maintain that his was a language that all should learn.<sup>8</sup> Indeed rather than accept the victory of Jefferson and the birth of an age which would see the further ascendance of the unbalanced abstract entity of "the people" as a refutation of

---

<sup>3</sup> Wood, *Creation of the American Republic*, pp.580-81.

<sup>4</sup> Joseph J. Ellis, *Passionate Sage* (New York, 1993), pp.69-74.

<sup>5</sup> John Adams, "Letters to the *Boston Patriot*", No. XII, *Works* 9:277: "Mr. Hamilton's erroneous opinions of the public opinion may be excused by the considerations that he was not a native of the United States..."

<sup>6</sup> Edmund S. Morgan, *The Meaning of Independence: John Adams, George Washington and Thomas Jefferson* (New York, 1978), p.8.

<sup>7</sup> Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic*, p.585.

<sup>8</sup> This can be seen in quite literal terms in the discussion between Rush and Adams on the merits of teaching young people Latin and Greek. Adams was certainly an advocate of the Classics. (Correspondence between Adams and Rush September 10th, 1810-February 13th, 1811, *Spur of Fame*, pp.166-179). In more general terms the issue became politicised; the Republicans extolled the practical benefits of teaching French whilst the Federalists, after 1800 increasingly reactionary, equated this

his opinions Adams saw the “Revolution of 1800”<sup>9</sup> as a validation of his past warnings. It provoked a restatement of them from 1805, and it is for this reason that the years of his retirement are invaluable in comprehending his thought and the intensity of the commitment to his central axiom, the institutionalised social balance of government.

## RETIREMENT

On the eve of Jefferson’s succession, John Adams scurried from the unfinished White House in the new and hideously incomplete capital. He and Abigail caught the 4:00 a.m. coach to Quincy<sup>10</sup> on March 4th 1801, thus avoiding Jefferson’s Inauguration.<sup>11</sup> He was bitter, but the cause of his downfall had been anticipated and to a certain extent indulged in. According to Joseph Ellis, in his sympathetic study of Adams’s retirement years,

His conduct during his four-year term served to exhibit the dominant features of the Adams personality in all their full blown splendour. It was quite likely, in short, that he would succeed in the area of policy but fail politically. Which is to say that he could do what was right for the country, but arrange events so that his personal fate suffered as a consequence.<sup>12</sup>

Ellis identifies a tendency for “psychological mischief” in Adams’s complex character, a perversity which drove him to alienate himself from the success and honour in posterity he so craved.<sup>13</sup> Complementary to this disposition; events conspired to disadvantage his time in office. Thomas Jefferson confessed to a certain

---

enthusiasm with an attachment to “French ideas” of equality, and mob rule. (Kerber, *Federalists in Dissent* [Ithaca, 1970], p.99-128).

<sup>9</sup> Peterson, *Adams and Jefferson: A Revolutionary Dialogue* (Oxford, 1978), p.2.

<sup>10</sup>As Braintree had been re-named, after Abigail’s Grandfather, Col. Quincy.

<sup>11</sup> John Ferling, *John Adams* (New York, 1996), p.413.

<sup>12</sup> Ellis, *Passionate Sage*, p.26.

<sup>13</sup> Ellis, *Passionate Sage*, p.27.



relief at having not been obliged to succeed Washington “just as the bubble is bursting.”<sup>14</sup> Adams was fully aware of these problems; indeed he could not overestimate them. Historically too, placed between Washington and Jefferson, he was doomed to be an unremarkable single-term President in the midst of epoch-making two-term Presidencies, each being followed by dignified retirements.<sup>15</sup>

His defeat in 1800 could do nothing but confirm his worst fears about the American future. It convinced him further in his critique of her institutions and electoral process and of the ungrateful treachery of her zealously partisan people.<sup>16</sup> His reflections upon American society had anticipated by implication his fate at the polls. Writing in 1801 he endeavours to convince William Tudor, “I am not about to write lamentations or jeremiads over my fate nor panegyrics upon my life and conduct,” although, in fact he did little else during the following twenty years: “You may think me disappointed [in losing office]. I am not. All my life I expected it...”<sup>17</sup>

His characteristic penchant for melodramatic statements has been established, therefore this can be viewed in the same way as can his “triumphalism” at having been proven right in his dire predictions for the Revolution in France; “Foresight” which he tended to vaunt to many friends and former critics on a regular basis throughout his retirement.

Yet, even discounting the invaluable benefit of hindsight for Adams’s later claims, the cause and manner of his defeat demonstrated in his own mind all that he had seen wrong in America. Party interest, the irrational clamour of the “simple man”

<sup>14</sup> Letter: Thomas Jefferson to James Madison in Ellis, *Passionate Sage*, p.27.

<sup>15</sup> Ellis, *Passionate Sage*, p.28; J.R Sharp, *Politics in the Early Republic* (New Haven, 1993), p.163.

<sup>16</sup> “Defence” [III], *Works* 6:25-27, 65-68; John Howe, *The Changing Political Thought of John Adams* (Princeton, 1966), p.218.

<sup>17</sup> Letter: John Adams to William Tudor, January 20th 1801, quoted in Ellis, *Passionate Sage*, p.26.

and the cunning chicanery of the “gentleman” had taken precedence over the public good. This proved the absolute need for an independent, non-partisan virtuous leader to stand above and apart from these considerations and in effect save the country from itself.

Ostensibly, he was defeated by intrigue within his own party, particularly the political machinations of his arch-enemy Alexander Hamilton, “the Sovereign Pontiff of Federalism”,<sup>18</sup> as well as by the partisan nature of the country at large. His Presidency was dominated by partisan divisions, which were based upon the threat of war, the undeclared “quasi-war” with France, and relations with Great Britain. The attacks on American shipping tested the administration’s adherence to Washington’s warning against foreign entanglements.<sup>19</sup> The French Revolutionary War raged in Europe, and the American Mission to France - Marshall, Gerry and Pinckney - were treated with deliberate contempt by the French. This was in retaliation for the “pro-British” Jay Treaty of 1795 which in America had pitted “...English and French sympathisers against each other, thus provoking a firestorm of protest and further politicising the American electorate,”<sup>20</sup> the exacerbation of which continued throughout Adams’s term.<sup>21</sup>

In 1773 he had surveyed and commented upon the prospect of a general election in Massachusetts and the inevitable “very numerous” examples of “Plots, Plans, Schemes, and Machinations.”<sup>22</sup> Less than a decade later in 1782 Adams had anticipated the emergence of French and English parties whose growth was hastened

---

<sup>18</sup> Letter: John Adams to Francis Van der Kamp, January 1806, Ellis, *Passionate Sage*, p.63; John Adams, “Letters to the *Boston Patriot*” passim, *Works*, 9:241-310.

<sup>19</sup> George Washington, “Farewell Address”, 17th September 1796, James D. Richardson (ed.), *A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents 1789-1897* (New York, 1897-1917), 1:221.

<sup>20</sup> J.R.Sharp, *Politics in the Early Republic*, p.113.

<sup>21</sup> “Letters to the *Boston Patriot*”, *Works*, 9:280-5.

by relations with these two powers during his Presidency.<sup>23</sup> His concern for the effect of these factions upon disunion in America continued into the next century.<sup>24</sup> The High Federalist aristocrats urged a defensive alliance with Great Britain, whilst the Jeffersonians, incensed by the Jay Treaty and the Alien and Sedition Acts, agitated for an alliance with Republican France.<sup>25</sup> This time of violent party passion saw the development of the early party system, party machinery, embryonic “campaigning”, and party tickets.<sup>26</sup> Adams’s foreboding in the third volume of the *Defence* is borne out. Therein he had predicted the gradual corruption of the electoral process, its infection with the party spirit, the subordination of the functions of government to electioneering and the politicisation of the press, clergy, Bar and theatre.<sup>27</sup>

This had been part of his more general and passionate critique of American society. Accordingly, his treatment by the people in 1800, his rejection, confirmed the depth of the corruption. He, a virtuous patriot, who had acted for the interests of his country over and above those of his party and in the process alienated himself from that party, had been defeated. His downfall was caused by the partisan spirit in the country and the political intrigue of Hamilton, within his own Party, who had endeavoured to ensure Adams was defeated.<sup>28</sup>

Alexander Hamilton, *de facto* “leader” of the High Federalists, had wanted to deprive Adams of re-election and ensure the victory of “his man” Charles C.

<sup>22</sup> “Diary”, May 25th 1773, *Diary and Autobiography*, 2:82.

<sup>23</sup> Morton Borden, *Parties and Politics in the Early Republic* (Arlington Heights, 1967), pp.47-50.

<sup>24</sup> “Diary” various entries 1782, *Diary and Autobiography* 3:49, 55, 56; Letter: John Adams to Dr. Benjamin Rush July 7th 1805, *The Spur of Fame*, p.29.

<sup>25</sup> J.R.Sharp, *The Politics in the Early Republic*, pp.169-75.

<sup>26</sup> Borden, *Parties and Politics* pp.43,49,54.

<sup>27</sup> “Defence” III, *Works* 6:58; Letters: John Adams to Dr. Benjamin Rush, 4th November 1809, *The Spur of Fame*, p.136.

<sup>28</sup> Borden, *Parties and Politics*, p.55; John Adams, “Letters to the *Boston Patriot*”: Letter XIV, *Works*, 9:292.

Pinckney.<sup>29</sup> Adams had proved too unpredictable, too independently minded, and there existed between him and Hamilton a deep personal antipathy.<sup>30</sup> In his pamphlet *The Public Conduct and Character of John Adams, ... President of the United States* Hamilton attacked Adams's character, his sanity, and his policies, particularly with regard to the Peace Mission to France despatched in 1799.<sup>31</sup> This Mission did secure peace, and thus saved America from war (although news of its success reached America too late to affect the election), and John Adams considered it his greatest political achievement, "the most splendid diamond in [his] crown",<sup>32</sup> wishing his Epitaph to record it as such:

Sir, I will defend my missions to France, as long as I have an eye to direct my hand, or a finger to hold my pen. They were the most disinterested and meritorious actions of my life. I reflect upon them with so much satisfaction, that I desire no other inscription over my gravestone than "Here lies John Adams, who took upon himself the responsibility of the peace with France in the year 1800."<sup>33</sup>

This response and the circumstances he was reacting to are an exemplar of his political theory. That his political career was destroyed in the process further confirms and justifies his argument. He acted independently and in defiance of his party, unilaterally authorising the Mission to France, leaving his party "thunderstruck."<sup>34</sup> Yet Adams was fulfilling the role he considered ought to belong to a monarchical Chief

---

<sup>29</sup> Hamilton had endeavoured to reduce the majority of John Adams in his election to the Vice-Presidency for Washington's first administration.

<sup>30</sup> Sharp, *Politics in the Early Republic*, p.210.

<sup>31</sup> Borden, *Parties and Politics* pp.54-56. R.A.Brown attributes Adams's reputation in part to the over-emphasis of historians on the opinions of his critics, particularly Hamilton. Ralph Adams Brown, *The Presidency of John Adams* (Lawrence, 1975), p.viii.

<sup>32</sup> Letter: John Adams to John Lloyd, 6th February 1815. He immediately apologises: "...or if one thinks this expression to monarchical I will say the most brilliant feather in my cap...", *Works*, 10:115.

<sup>33</sup> Letter: John Adams to John Lloyd, 6th February 1815, *Works*, 10:115.

<sup>34</sup> Ellis, *Passionate Sage*, pp. 32-33.

Executive at the apex of the structure: firm and independent action for the common good.<sup>35</sup>

That there was a need for such an institution and demand for such a role was shown by Hamilton's actions, which demonstrated the insidious party influence in the country, the realities of aristocratic cunning and of the democratic character Adams had attempted to expose and explain, and which, as Adams had predicted, rendered election results inimical to the republican ideal of leadership.<sup>36</sup> Party interest and manipulation determined elections, not merit and virtue. In short, Adams had to be virtuous, whilst the rest of the country and system was not.

He had always been a reluctant and unreliable partisan, and decried the violent partisan spirit.<sup>37</sup> These divisions were inevitable of course, as his political theory showed:

Alas! [Parties] began with human nature; they have existed in America from its first plantation. In every colony divisions always prevailed. In New York, Pennsylvania, Virginia, the Massachusetts, and all the rest, a court and country party have always contended.<sup>38</sup>

He viewed the conflict between the High Federalists and the Republicans as he did the enduring division between the aristocratic and democratic faction. It demanded of him

---

<sup>35</sup> Letter: John Adams to Roger Sherman, 1789, *Works*, 6:431-2; John Adams to Dr. Benjamin Rush, 19th September 1806, *The Spur of Fame*, p.67.

<sup>36</sup> In the event the House of Representatives determined the final result of the Election by deciding between Thomas Jefferson and Aaron Burr (as they did for John Quincy Adams in 1824). Thus it was wholly a Party affair. Hamilton urged his party to vote for Jefferson (since he distrusted him a little less than Burr who was at a later date to take Hamilton's life in a duel.) Stalemate ensued, until a number of Federalists abstained allowing Jefferson to succeed. (Borden, *Parties and Politics in the Early Republic*, p.103).

<sup>37</sup> Neither he nor Thomas Jefferson personified their Parties, and on many issues they were close, for instance they both opposed Hamilton's financial programme. On other issues, such as the French Revolution and the policy of national defence there were significant differences. Nevertheless Adams offered to form a bi-partisan administration with Jefferson, after 1796. On the advice of Madison, Jefferson declined. That the offer had been made at all angered the High Federalists. (Manning Dauer, "The Political Economy of John Adams", *Political Science Quarterly* 56 (1941); pp.566-68; Letter: John Adams to Dr. Benjamin Rush, December 25th 1811, *The Spur of Fame* p.201; Borden, *Parties and Politics*, pp.33-44).

<sup>38</sup> Letter: John Adams to William Keteltas, 25 November 1812, *Works*, 10:23.

a role by which he became “a leader without a party”<sup>39</sup> standing astride these two interests and representing the “whole Commonwealth.”<sup>40</sup>

Adams had offered Jefferson the opportunity to form a bi-partisan administration, which he refused, demonstrating to Adams his preference for party over both friendship and the interest of the country. The controversy over the “Midnight Appointments”<sup>41</sup> by which Adams perpetuated Federalism in the Judiciary long after the demise of the Party does not diminish or contradict this independent spirit. The motive behind this further shows his commitment to the Union, and his fear of its being subverted, threats which required the institutional regulation and government style which he had written of and urged over the last decade.

### THE THREATS REMAIN

For the first five years of his retirement Adams abstained from political comment, far from content, but willing to concentrate on re-acquaintance with his wife and family.<sup>42</sup> Slowly he re-established old contacts, with Rush, and at the latter’s repeated behest, with Jefferson in 1812. He was depressed by the fading of the Revolutionary generation, and by the emerging era. He initiated his Autobiography in 1803, “an open

<sup>39</sup> Ellis, *Passionate Sage*, p.36.

<sup>40</sup> “Letters to the Boston Patriot”, *Works*, 9:241-310.

<sup>41</sup> Jefferson’s anger at this act soured relations with the Adams family for over a decade (Correspondence between Thomas Jefferson and Abigail Adams, May-October 1804, *Adams-Jefferson* 1:268-282). Republican propagandists made more of this than was perhaps warranted. It may be judged to have had the desired effect: Adams’s appointment of the Federalist Marshall led to the establishment of judicial review for the Supreme Court in the *Marbury v. Madison* case (J.R. Sharp, *Politics in the Early Republic* p.172; Ellis, *Passionate Sage*, pp.19-25).

<sup>42</sup> Howe, *Changing Political Thought of John Adams*, p.217. This period, was not without incident or high drama. His favourite daughter Abigail, married to the feckless Col. William Smith, died in 1813, his wife Abigail in 1818. In 1806 His grandson William Stuben Smith, with his father, was involved in a plot to “liberate Venezuela”. The father was imprisoned by the American government for his part, whilst the son was captured by the Spanish and narrowly avoided execution. (Ferling, *John Adams*, p.426).

wound”,<sup>43</sup> a bulging dossier, a brief for his defence, containing transcriptions of his Diary and verbatim accounts of debates, with copies of pertinent documents and letters: *The Revolution According to Adams*.<sup>44</sup>

This text contained his view of the American Revolution: it was a defence of his under-appreciated role, and that of other neglected heroes. He displays profound dissatisfaction with the politicised interpretations of the Revolution, and this must be seen as another aspect of his critique. His *Discourses on Davila* had “held up in a thousand mirrors” the nature of the threats facing the American people.<sup>45</sup> In 1805, republishing the *Discourses* in a one volume collection, however, he laments the folly of the people in ignoring the sentiments and warnings set out therein, observing that “the evils he had intended to prevent had come to pass.”<sup>46</sup> Although prone to episodes of relative optimism and confidence in a future of American greatness,<sup>47</sup> for the most part he saw only further vindication of these warnings.

Through his correspondence, and the marginalia he scattered throughout the books in his library - his own works, and those of others<sup>48</sup> - he reaffirms the conclusions of his political philosophy as it had evolved since the Stamp Act, warning of the continuing threats to American liberty, which were as real as those in 1765. Of these threats he perceives as serious the ideologically inspired retrospectives of the

---

<sup>43</sup> Ellis, *Passionate Sage*, p.426.

<sup>44</sup> “Autobiography”, *Diary and Autobiography*, vols. 3-4 *passim*, Letters: John Adams to William Tudor *et al.* *Works* 10:171-85, 271-79.

<sup>45</sup> Letter: John Adams to Dr. Benjamin Rush, 27th December 1810, quoted in Ellis, *Passionate Sage*, p.146

<sup>46</sup> Published edition of *Davila*, quoted by Charles Francis Adams, *Works* 6:338; Letter: John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, July 9th, 1813, *Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 2:350.

<sup>47</sup> Letters: John Adams to Thomas McKean 26th November 1815, *Works* 10:182; John Adams to David Sewall 22nd May 1821 “As we have been friends for seventy years, and are candidates for promotion to another world....We shall leave the world with many consolations. It is better than we found it. Superstition, persecution and bigotry are somewhat abated; governments are a little ameliorated; science and literature are greatly improved, and more widely spread.” *Works*, 10:399.

<sup>48</sup> Zoltan Haraszti, *John Adams and the Prophets of Progress* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1952), *passim*

American Revolution, the over-emphasising of certain individuals and neglect of others. He particularly objects to the prominence given to Paine, who was regarded by some as the “great author of the American Revolution...”.<sup>49</sup> Reflecting upon this trend Adams promises Jefferson that if Paine was indeed the “author” of their achievement, he desired his “name...blotted out forever from its records.”<sup>50</sup>

History was hijacked for party ends, and infected by the contemporary party conflict.<sup>51</sup> Adams, who had “very solemn notions of the sanctity of history”,<sup>52</sup> rarely missed an opportunity to debunk these “false notions,”<sup>53</sup> and it was for these ends that he was engaged in a long running dispute with Mercy Otis Warren from 1807, which left him convinced that a true account of the Revolution would never be related.<sup>54</sup>

His rather self-indulgent exchange with Warren involved his own variety of revisionism. That is, he attempted to diminish or destroy various revolutionary myths, spurious heroes and even misrepresentative art.<sup>55</sup> He strove to de-emphasise the roles of individuals, like “Old Mutton-head” Washington, and in a similar exercise, for similar ends, he dismissed the significance of the Declaration of Independence, and Jefferson along with it.<sup>56</sup> This attempt to discourage the identification of the

---

<sup>49</sup> Letter: John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, July 15th 1813, *Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 2:357.

<sup>50</sup> Letter: John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, July 15th 1813, *Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 2:358.

<sup>51</sup> Lester Cohen, “Historian and the National Past”, *The American Revolution: Its Character and Limits* (ed.) Jack Greene (New York, 1987).

<sup>52</sup> Letter: John Adams to Dr. Benjamin Rush, August 31st 1809, *Spur of Fame*, p.142.

<sup>53</sup> Letter: John Adams to Samuel Perley, 19th June 1809, *Works*, 9:622.

<sup>54</sup> Jack Shepherd, *The Adams Chronicles* (Boston 1975); Letter: John Adams to H. Niles, *Works* 10:274.

<sup>55</sup> He objected to John Trumbull’s now famous painting of the Signing of the Declaration, all assembled at one time on July 4th for two principal reasons: the serenity of the scene belies the misgivings and reluctance of many of the signatories. Secondly, only a few individuals actually signed on the 4th, there was never a time when all were assembled together. (Ellis, *Passionate Sage*, p.100).

<sup>56</sup> “Autobiography” *Diary and Autobiography* 3:335-6, 385-400; Letter: John Adams to Dr. Benjamin Rush *Works* 9:591. In the margins of a published collection of his *Davila Letters*: “...The mighty Jefferson, by the Declaration of Independence, 4th July 1776 carried away all the glory...The Declaration of Independence contained nothing but the Boston Declaration of 1772 and the Congress Declaration of 1774. Such are the caprices of fortune.” (Zoltan Haraszti, *John Adams and the Prophets of Progress*, p.174).



Revolution with just a few individuals promoted instead a view which saw it as the culmination of a process which had begun generations before.

This was futile both in practical terms and also by the measure of his own thought which accepted as inevitable the veneration of certain individuals, families and the all powerful effect of "a name."<sup>57</sup> However, despite this contradiction, and betraying the abstract nature of Adams's own thought, the electoral manipulation of these human tendencies further confirmed his long-standing position.

He did not understand the new age that this tendency reflected. The radicalism of Paine, anathema to Adams, appealed to the rhetoric of the time, as did a radical retrospective of the Revolution itself, which now, according to Warren, could come to fruition with the defeat of the Federalists.<sup>58</sup> Although he recognised that Jefferson's "...steady defence of democratical principles, and...invariable favourable opinion of the French Revolution, laid the foundation of [his] popularity,"<sup>59</sup> he was a ready critic of the new administration.<sup>60</sup> However, he was never as concerned as others in the Federalist party, with which he formally broke in 1812 regarding Jefferson's policies, and he was relieved that the more radical elements in the Republican Party had been held in check. He could not indulge in the anti-Jefferson abuse of Margaret Bayard who considered him a "violent democrat...vulgar demagogue...bold atheist and [a] profligate man."<sup>61</sup> Nevertheless he dismisses Jefferson's ideology, particularly his synthetic "Democratic plainness", manifested in affected plainness of speech and

---

<sup>57</sup> "Discourse", *Works*, 6:236-9, 269-71.

<sup>58</sup> Ellis, *Passionate Sage*, pp.70-75

<sup>59</sup> John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, July 13th 1813, *Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 2:356.

<sup>60</sup> Letter: John Adams to Dr. Benjamin Rush, February 2nd 1805, *Spur of Fame*, p.21.

<sup>61</sup> Esmond Wright, "Jefferson and the Jeffersonian Ideal", *British Essays on American History* (Allen and Hill (eds.) London, 1957), p.61.

Government style.<sup>62</sup> To Rush he explains the “emphasis and mood”<sup>63</sup> which differentiated the alternate Federalist and Republican administrations:

In the point of republicanism, all the differences I ever knew or could discover between you and me or between Jefferson and me, consisted... (1)...In the difference between speeches and messages. I was a monarchist because I thought a speech more manly, more respectable to congress and to the nation, Jefferson and Rush preferred messages. (2) I held levees once a week, that all the time might not be wasted by idle visits. Jefferson's whole eight years was a Levee... (3) I dined a large company once or twice a week. Jefferson dined a dozen every day... (4) Jefferson and Rush were for liberty and straight hair. I thought curled hair was as Republican as straight.<sup>64</sup>

This might be expected from the man who on a number of occasions harangued the Senate (abandoning the passive role expected of the Vice-President in that assembly), with instruction on British practice and Parliamentary protocol, himself resplendent in a powdered wig and sword.<sup>65</sup> However this is part of his continued opposition to the sort of ideological abstractions symptomatic of the false claims he saw as having caused the bloodshed in Europe since 1789, and the associated unrest at home.

He perceived these false theories of perfectibility and equality as a principal threat to American liberty. He considered the quest for perfectibility an impious enterprise, and its proponents to be “cracked”<sup>66</sup> and quite possibly “stark mad.”<sup>67</sup> Indeed if his age was that of progress, he would prefer the supposed unenlightened age: “...give us again”, he had written in the *Discourses*, “the more intelligible as well as the more comfortable systems of Athanasius and Calvin; nay, give us again our Popes and

<sup>62</sup> Borden, *Parties and Politics*, pp.62-3.

<sup>63</sup> Esmond Wright, “Jefferson and the Jeffersonian Ideal”, p.67.

<sup>64</sup> Letter: John Adams to Dr. Benjamin Rush, December 25th 1811, *The Spur of Fame*, pp.201-2.

<sup>65</sup> Ferling, *John Adams*, p.304.

<sup>66</sup> John Adams to Dr. Benjamin Rush; 11 November 1806, *Spur of Fame*, p.72; Letter: John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, December 16th 1816, *Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 2:445.

<sup>67</sup> John Adams, on Condorcet; Haraszti, *Prophets of Progress*, p.122.

hierarchies, Benedictines and Jesuits, with all their superstitions and fanaticism, impostures and tyranny.”<sup>68</sup>

He saw ideology, or “idiotism” as he dubbed it, as the scourge of the new age, an age which, as a result, Adams refused to regard as the age of reason,<sup>69</sup> viewing ideology in the same light as the medieval fallacies which had bound feudal society together, and opposing it as such with the same object as in 1765. Dogma lay behind the false history of Warren, the artifice of Jefferson and the decline in deference and respect which Adams so resented.

The ideology of the Republicans and the tendency toward romanticism and the idolisation of certain individuals in both parties exacerbated existing tensions. The democratic faction, increasingly emboldened and radical, hostile to any form or suggestion of subordination, was a potentially tyrannous force; whilst the High Federalist aristocrats romanticised Washington and Hamilton for their own ends.<sup>70</sup>

Adams continued to see the problems of American society in terms of “orders”, ranks, and the institutionalisation of social groups, with specific roles, virtues and vices particular to each of them, traditional conceptions which Adams grafted on to American society as part of his analysis, convinced that they must fit. Maintaining his frank appraisal of social divisions he continued to see a distinct democratic interest in perpetual conflict with an equally distinct aristocratic interest. He predicted that this would take the form of a perpetual cycle of “leap-frog”, the periodic changing of party administrations.<sup>71</sup>

---

<sup>68</sup> “Discourses”, *Works* 6:281.

<sup>69</sup> Letter: John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, December 16th 1816, *Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 2:502.

<sup>70</sup> Letter: John Adams to Dr. Benjamin Rush, February 2nd 1805, *The Spur of Fame*, p.21.

<sup>71</sup> Letter: John Adams to Dr. Benjamin Rush, 20th July 1808, *Spur of Fame*, p.110. He anticipated a twelve year cycle, whereby at each turn there would be “a total revolution in Politics.”

This analysis endured despite his declining faith in an aristocratic bulwark for salvation, in so far as it had ever existed.<sup>72</sup> Rather than representing a depository of wisdom and patriotism the new monied aristocracy represented only narrow avaricious interests; stock jobbers created by the banking system<sup>73</sup> in the "spirit of speculation."<sup>74</sup> Their loyalty could not be depended upon. Adams had been deeply affected by the Hartford Convention and the movement amongst this group toward New England separatism, which had begun with their opposition to the War of 1812. This was a War which Adams had hoped would foster a renewed virtue and sense of national identity (and was in the most part satisfied that it had).<sup>75</sup>

Further, the seeds of secession lay in the regional prejudices and in particular with the character of the South, where Adams anticipated a future conflict with the commercial North, seeing slavery as an inevitable flash-point.<sup>76</sup> The threat posed by an unchecked aristocracy was further confirmed for Adams by the Hillhouse plan for Constitutional Reform, an attempt to strengthen the power of the Senate, considered the aristocratic assembly by Adams, at the expense of the Executive.<sup>77</sup> The same threats remained:

Our Executive is a mere *testa di lengo*. A mere head of wood. A mere football, kicked and Tossed by Frenchmen, Englishmen, or rather Scotchmen, [i.e. Hamilton] and ignorant, mischievous boys. And yet you and Jefferson think our Executive too strong.<sup>78</sup>

<sup>72</sup> Letters: John Adams to Dr. Benjamin Rush, in which he took an increasingly hostile line with regard to the emerging aristocratic interest. It had few of the redeeming features which Adams depended upon, not least because the measures he had urged in the last century had not been put into practice. Letter: John Adams to Dr. Benjamin Rush, 18th April 1808, *The Spur of Fame*, p.108.

<sup>73</sup> Dauer, "The Political Economy of John Adams".

<sup>74</sup> "Review of the Hillhouse Plan", *Works* 6:531; Dauer, "The Political Economy of John Adams".

<sup>75</sup> Howe, *Changing Political Thought of John Adams* pp.238-40.

<sup>76</sup> Letters: John Adams to Robert Evans, 8th June 1819, *Works* 10:379; Howe, *The Changing Thought of John Adams*, pp.244-46.

<sup>77</sup> Response of John Adams to Hillhouse's Proposition for Constitutional Change: *Works* 6:526-7.

<sup>78</sup> John Adams to Dr. Benjamin Rush, July 10th 1812, *Spur of Fame*, p.232; Letter to Richard Rush, May 14th 1821, *Works* 10:397.

However Adams, clinging doggedly to his assumptions, did perhaps underestimate the power of a compelling ideology in fostering a politically responsible people and maintaining a society free of the necessity for European remedies. Perhaps he had spent too much time in Europe, as Warren suggested, so as to become trapped in a mode of thinking which excluded the possibility of an alternative path of political development.

In 1814 Adams was obliged to defend his *Defence* against a similarly laborious Adams-style refutation by John Taylor, a Southern aristocrat who maintained the claim of special providence for America, the egalitarian possibility of her unique conditions and character of the people, all of which Adams refused to accept.<sup>79</sup> Re-stating his case for the Analysis of Antiquity he considered contrary claims,

As gross a fraud, as glaring an imposition on the credulity of the people, as ever was practised by monks, Druids, by Brahmins, by priests of the immortal Lama, or by the self-styled philosophers of the French revolution. For honour's sake, Mr Taylor, for truth and virtues sake, let American philosophers and politicians despise it.<sup>80</sup>

However, Taylor, in challenging Adams's anomalous position, on the grounds that the social basis for the political division is absent, and reflecting upon the Federalist defeat of 1800, claims that Adams did not appreciate the dynamics of power and representation in society.

But what is perhaps most significant is that he did appreciate the change, but perhaps not the full implications of it for his frame of thought, which prevented him from changing his ideas, even if he had had the will to.

---

<sup>79</sup> Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic*, p.589.

<sup>80</sup> "Taylor Letters", *Works* 6:454.

I have thought that our Constitution was quasi or mixed Government, but they have now made it, to all intents and purposes, in virtue, spirit and effect, a democracy....the Lord have mercy upon us.<sup>81</sup>

That is to say, he *did* now understand the essentially representative basis of all the institutions, and lamented it as such. Perhaps taking his sociological view too far, he interpreted it as a dangerous imbalance and therefore continued to reflect upon the same threats to American liberties. He was never placated.

It is largely upon this basis that he was considered “Hostile to the Republicanism of the United States”, which in the context of the time was implicitly an accusation of subversion.<sup>82</sup> Charles Holt, a former editor of a Jeffersonian paper, wrote to Adams in 1820 repenting of his former charges against him, which Adams graciously accepted.<sup>83</sup> Jefferson too, as a result of their resumed correspondence, which included their most frank exchanges, was satisfied of Adams’s commitment to “Republicanism”. However the reputation endured.

The term, republicanism, remains problematic: its abstract, malleable nature means that the accusation is difficult to deal with. Conflicting definitions were in part responsible, for the misunderstandings which tainted Adams’s reputation. To Adams it could encompass the essentials of the British Constitution, excepting only the need for a reformed, more representative democratic branch.<sup>84</sup> For others, the exclusion of any hereditary power or monarchic Executive was a pre-requisite.<sup>85</sup>

Adams’s working definition changed, as I have shown; he recognised the inherent flaws in the term as a firm concept, reducing the definition essentially to an essentially

---

<sup>81</sup> Letter: John Adams to Dr. Benjamin Rush, September 9th, 1806, *Spur of Fame*, p.67; cf. Wood, *Creation of the American Republic*, p.587.

<sup>82</sup> Stewart, *The Opposition Press in the Federalist Era* (New York, 1969), p.485.

<sup>83</sup> Letters exchanged between John Adams and Charles Holt, *Works*, 10:292.

<sup>84</sup> Letter: John Adams to J.H. Tiffany, *Works*, 10:278.

consequentialist principle, whilst explaining that it could “signify any thing, every thing, or nothing,”<sup>86</sup> and describing it to Mercy Warren as the most “unintelligible word in the English Language...” - a tool of deception.<sup>87</sup>

His position in relation to the many different and contradictory definitions of Republicanism caused his estrangement from the popular view of the Revolution and from the development of American thought after the 1780s. This rendered him a curious anachronism in liberal America, occupying a position contrary to the dominant ideology.

Confirming this, Merriam and others who have followed him claim that to admire Adams is to be “un-American”,<sup>88</sup> especially when this admiration is in relation to a contrast with Jefferson. Yet, in many ways Adams was the victim of misapprehension and misrepresentation, concerning what he really thought, predicted, or endorsed.

He never denied an essential role for the people; as long as they had their “Commons” he saw no material difference and therefore nothing contrary to “republicanism” in a hereditary magistrate or Senate.<sup>89</sup> Indeed he expected the people to desire such institutions for the security of their own liberties. He urged that the present system should be given a “fair trial” but took considerable comfort in the fact that the American people were accustomed to, and willing to participate in, constitutional conventions. Rather than representing a seditious intent, *against* the people, all that he anticipated, based upon on the pattern of history, would be the result of a wise choice *by the people*:

---

<sup>85</sup> Letter: Roger Sherman to John Adams, *Works*, 6:437.

<sup>86</sup> Letter: John Adams to J.H. Tiffany, *Works*, 10:278

<sup>87</sup> Letter: John Adams to Mercy Otis Warren, 20th July 1807, in Ellis, *Passionate Sage*, p.71

<sup>88</sup> Merriam, *American Political Ideas*, vol. I (New York, 1903), p.29-30.

<sup>89</sup> “Defence” [III], *Works* 6:67; Letter: John Adams to Roger Sherman, *Works*, 6:428-9.

If the present States become great nations, rich, powerful and luxurious, as well as numerous, their own feeling and good sense will dictate to them what to do: they may make the transitions to a nearer resemblance of the British Constitution, by a fresh convention, without the smallest interruption to liberty...<sup>90</sup>

This was as early as 1787, and was a position consolidated through later writings. In 1790 he wrote to Richard Price, praising the Constitution as an *adequate* expedient to “prevent us for a time from drawing our swords upon each other”, but he was already anticipating the time when it would prove inadequate for this task; “when it will do that no longer, we must call a new convention to reform it.”<sup>91</sup>

This does betray a certain lack of faith, an expectation of degeneration, a decline into conflict unless the precautionary measures he advocates were taken. There is also much which suggests a sense of urgency in this pragmatic accommodation of a lesser evil: “better make the Chief Executive and Senate hereditary at once”<sup>92</sup>.

The reluctance too, is clear, and I think nothing would have made Adams happier than to have been proven wrong, but he could not accept the possibility of refutation; his works had “...nothing to recommend them but stubborn facts, [and] simple principles.”<sup>93</sup>

The inevitable corruption and thus frailty of republican virtue through time and accumulation of wealth were fundamental aspects of republican thought. The “Theory of Empires”, so influential in persuading the Americans that their time had come, entailed within it the inevitable fact of American degeneration in turn, a process which could be hastened, or decelerated but never halted.<sup>94</sup>

<sup>90</sup> “Defence” [I], *Works*, 4:359.

<sup>91</sup> Letter: John Adams to Richard Price, 19th April 1790, *Works*, 9:564-71.

<sup>92</sup> “Defence [III], *Works*, 6:57

<sup>93</sup> Letter: John Adams to Charles Holt, *Works*, 10:292.

<sup>94</sup> John Howe, *The Changing Political Thought of John Adams*, pp.36-40.



This view was shared by those who were otherwise considered to be in opposition to the positions attributed to Adams. Madison predicted that there would be an American Monarchy by 1929,<sup>95</sup> whilst the optimism of Jefferson accommodated a caveat:

I think our Government will remain virtuous for many centuries, as long as they are chiefly agricultural, and this will be as long as there shall be vacant lands in any part of America. When they get piled upon one another, as in Europe, they will become corrupt as in Europe.<sup>96</sup>

It is tempting then, in defence of Adams, to view his thought in terms of a time scale, and therefore to conclude that it is too early to judge. In other respects, as easy as it is to dismiss his obsession with “orders”, the concerns that underlay this thought are valid. His concern with declining virtue may have been invalidated by the achievement of a Constitution which dispensed with its necessity,<sup>97</sup> nevertheless his critique of elections, his despair at the creeping mediocrity and democratic philistinism of the approaching age, borne out by Jackson and the rise of the “Common Man”, are accurate contentions, as is his fear of the opposing aristocracy of wealth.

In *Democracy in America* de Tocqueville remarks upon the differences between the American and the European aristocracies. Social conditions had indeed precluded the development of an American aristocracy along European lines, refuting Adams.<sup>98</sup> However he does confirm Adams’s view of the character and corruption of American electoral politics,<sup>99</sup> and similarly condemns the character of the new aristocracy

---

<sup>95</sup> Merriam, *American Political Ideas*, vol. I, p.29-30.

<sup>96</sup> Ford, Paul L. (ed.) *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson* (New York, 1892-99), 20:442.

<sup>97</sup> Wood, *Creation of the American Republic*, pp.605-7.

<sup>98</sup> De Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (London, 1994), pp.399-400.

<sup>99</sup> De Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, pp.197-203.

“created by Industry.”<sup>100</sup> There can be little doubt that Adams would have preferred the aristocracy of Europe, or certainly that of Great Britain, to the new monied interests, who held power with no sense of *noblesse oblige*. Perhaps his own idealised view is represented in some small way by elements of the Eastern establishment comprising families with a tradition of service, of which the Adams Family has been an exemplar.

In many ways Adams was a true patriot. In 1808 he wrote to Rush of his essential principle:

An Aristocracy of wealth, without any check but a democracy of licentiousness, is our curse...I will be neither Aristocrat, nor democrat without a moderator between the two. With such a Mediator I will be both.<sup>101</sup>

But what is to be made of John Adams? He knew that his opinions “ran counter to those generally received”, but was confident that he would be proven right in the long-term: “I do not effect singularity, nor love to be in a minority, though truth and justice have sometimes obliged me to be so.”<sup>102</sup>

Despite the apparent changes in his thought from 1765 his central consistency remains. However there is validity in the view that his thought has both methodological and political flaws and he can justly be seen as a man of little faith. Much more satisfying and palatable for his generation was the faith that they were embarking upon a novel endeavour in founding a virtuous republic; a noble enterprise which could be expressed and pursued through grand plans and inspirational rhetoric. Adams may be reviled as a spoiler of this in his insistence that Americans remained, for the most part, transplanted Englishmen.

---

<sup>100</sup> De Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, pp.555-558.

<sup>101</sup> Letter: John Adams to Dr. Benjamin Rush, 18th April 1808, *Spur of Fame*, p.108.

<sup>102</sup> Letter: John Adams to Livingston, *Works*, 8:27.

Wood's case for his being an irrelevant, counter-Enlightenment figure is accurate in that, whilst Adams is not entirely wrong in his reflections upon the similarities between the Old and New World, he did remain oblivious to the very real differences and changes which America represented.

Edmund Morgan, in the *Meaning of Independence*, dismisses the naïve simplicity of Adams's over-emphasis of a single political principle as the only lesson of history, used to explain and apply to all issues and instances. However, if this charge is accepted, as well it might be, this can at least absolve Adams to a certain degree of hostility to "Republicanism". He lacked such hostile intent, essentially because he never understood the term as other did.

His thought as it developed from the time of the Stamp Act was based around a simple creed, reflecting his greatest concerns: security of property and the people's liberties. For this reason he opposed Parliamentary tyranny, and for this cause again he later opposed the tyranny of the people. As he concentrated increasingly on the darker side of democracy, he relied, however unrealistically, on the remedy of the mixed constitution, convinced that only this could guaranteed an "Empire of Laws". All else was an elaboration upon the theme of the means to achieve this equilibrium.

In 1763 in a short *Essay on Man's Lust for Power* he had warned: "No Simple Form of Government, can possibly secure Man against the Violences of Power...". An annotation of 1807 by an unrepentant Adams adds, "This...has been the Creed of my whole life and is now, March 27th 1807 as much approved as it was when it was written by John Adams."<sup>103</sup>

---

<sup>103</sup> *Papers of John Adams*, 1:83; Letter John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, 13th November 1815, *Works*, 10:176.

This became his definition of republicanism, to the exclusion of many other considerations. This creed became as dogmatic as the ideology which he rejected, but which he proved unequal to. Wood makes a case for the republicanisation of Monarchy in England during the eighteenth century and it was with this notion that Adams developed his thought from the mid 1780s in a way which assumed the essentially republican nature of the British system, thus justifying a near complete transposition to America. An error of judgement indeed, one which succeeded in associating him with more illiberal, principled Monarchists, thus creating his reputation. The cause was a contrary ideology that rendered Adams's ideas "hostile" and inexplicable, an ideology that will still render them so, despite the functional justification and the arguments he employed to argue for a dispassionate appraisal of institutions, power, and social roles.

APPENDIX I: GENEALOGICAL CHART

*The Adams Family of Massachusetts*  
*Descent from John Alden, with descendants of President Adams<sup>1</sup>*

**Hon. John Alden** = Priscilla Mullins  
 (1599-1687) *b.* Southampton Eng. Came over on *The Mayflower*.  
 Married 1620.

**Ruth Alden** = John Bass  
 (*d.* 1674) Braintree, MA  
 Married 1657 Plymouth, MA.

**Hannah Bass** = John Adams  
 (1667-1705) (b. 1654)

**Deacon John Adams** = Susannah Boylston  
 (1691-1761) Braintree, MA  
 Cordwainer & Farmer. (1709-1797)

**President JOHN ADAMS** = Abigail Smith<sup>2</sup>  
 (19th Oct. 1735-4th Jul. 1826) Braintree, MA  
 (1744-1818) Married: Weymouth, MA  
 25th October 1764

**President John Quincy Adams** = Louisa Johnson  
 (1767-1848) Quincy MA. Died in the  
 Speakers Room, US Congress

Abigail Adams = William Smith  
 (1765-1816) (1775-1852) Born in  
 London, died. Washington  
 DC. Married London 1797.

Susannah Adams  
 (1768-1770)  
**Charles Adams**  
 (1770-1800)  
**Thomas Boylston Adams**  
 (1772-1832)

**George Washington Adams**  
 (1801-1829) *d.s.p.*

**John Adams** = Mary Hellen  
 (1803-1834) *d.s.p.*  
 Married in the White House, 1828

**Hon. Charles Francis Adams** = Abigail Brooks  
 (1807-1886) Boston, MA  
 Minister to England 1861-68

(1808-1889) of Medford,  
 MA. Married there 1829.

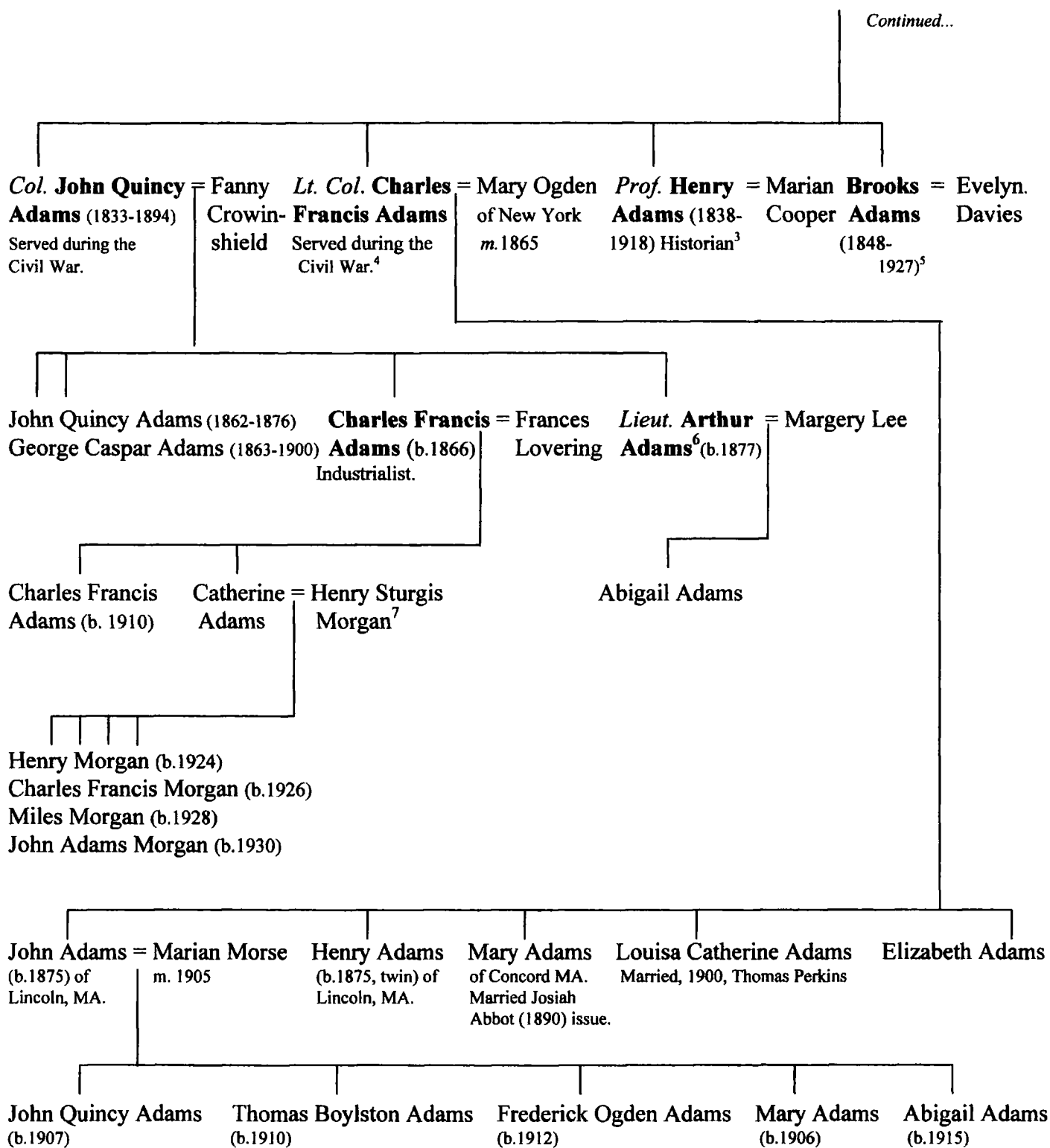
Key:  
*b.* = birth  
*d.* = death  
*d.s.p.* = died sine prole  
 (without issue).

<sup>1</sup> "The Adams Family, formerly of Barton David [Somerset, England]", *Burkes Landed Gentry of the British Empire* (Supplement: "American Families with British Descent." (London, 1939); Jack Shepherd, *The Adams Chronicles: Four Generations of Greatness* (Boston, 1975); Richard Allen Dutton (compiler), *The Lineage of the Adams Family of Massachusetts* (Unpublished, Florida).

<sup>2</sup> Abigail Adams was a kinswoman of her husband through the Boylston family.

APPENDIX I: THE ADAMS FAMILY OF MASSACHUSETTS

Continued...



<sup>3</sup> Henry Adams, Professor of History at Harvard University and author of (among others) *History of the United States under the Administrations of Jefferson and Madison*.

<sup>4</sup> Charles Francis Adams II was President of the Massachusetts Historical Society from 1895 to 1915.

<sup>5</sup> Brooks Adams, Lecturer at Boston University Law School, social commentator and critic of modern America.

<sup>6</sup> Arthur Adams, of Dover Mass., served in World War I.

<sup>7</sup> Henry Sturgis Morgan, son of John Pierpont Morgan, Banker.

## Bibliography

### *Adams's Works, Essays and Correspondence*

- ADAIR, Douglass and SCHUTZ, John A. (eds.), *The Spur of Fame: Dialogues of John Adams and Benjamin Rush, 1805-1813* (San Marino, California, 1966).
- ADAMS, Charles Francis (ed.), *The Works of John Adams, Second President of the United States: With a Life of the Author* (10 vols.) (Boston, Massachusetts, 1850-56).
- BUTTERFIELD, L.H. (ed.), *Diary and Autobiography of John Adams* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1961).
- BUTTERFIELD, L.H. (ed.), *The Earliest Diary of John Adams* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1966).
- BUTTERFIELD, L.H., et al. (eds.) *Adams Family Correspondence* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard, 1963-).
- BUTTERFIELD, L.H., et al. (eds.), *The Book of Abigail and John: Selected Letters of the Adams Family 1762-1784* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1975).
- CAPPON, Lester (ed.), *The Adams-Jefferson Letters: The Correspondence Between Thomas Jefferson and Abigail and John Adams* (2 vols.) (Chapel Hill, 1959).
- MASSACHUSETTS HISTORICAL SOCIETY, "Warren-Adams letters" *Massachusetts Historical Society Collections*, (vols. 72-73) (Boston, 1917, 1925).
- PEEK, George A., (ed.), *The Political Writings of John Adams: Representative Selections* (New York, 1954).
- TAYLOR, Robert J. et al. (eds.) *Papers of John Adams* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1977).

### *Other Collections*

- BOYD, Julian, et. al. (eds.), *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson* (Princeton, 1950-).
- FORD, Paul L. (ed.), *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson* (New York, 1892-99).
- HYNEMAN, Charles and LUTZ, Donald, *American Political Writing During the Founding Era 1760-1805*, (2 vols.) (Indianapolis, 1983).
- JEFFERSON, Thomas, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (edited by William Peden) (Chapel Hill, 1982).
- JENSEN, Merrill (ed.), "American Colonial Documents to 1776", *English Historical Documents IX* (London, 1969).

### *Other Works and Articles Consulted*

- ADAMS, Willi Paul, *The First American Constitutions: Republican Ideology and the Making of the Constitutions in the Revolutionary Era* (Chapel Hill, 1980).
- ALLEN, H. C. and HILL C. P. (eds.), *British Essays on American History* (London, 1957).
- APPLEBY, Joyce O., "The New Republican Synthesis and the Changing Political Ideas of John Adams", *American Quarterly* vol.25 (1973).
- APPLEBY, Joyce O., *Liberalism and Republicanism in the Historical Imagination* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1992).

- APPLEBY, Joyce O. "The Jefferson-Adams Rupture and the First Translation of John Adams's 'Defence'", *American Historical Review* vol.73 (1968).
- BAILYN, Bernard, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (3rd edition: Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1992).
- BAILYN, Bernard, *The Faces of the Revolution* (New York, 1990).
- BANNING, Lance, *The Jeffersonian Persuasion: Evolution of a Party Ideology* (Ithaca, 1978).
- BORDEN, Morton *Parties and Politics in the Early Republic* (Arlington Heights, 1967).
- BREEN, Timothy H., "John Adams's Fight Against Innovation in New England", *New England Quarterly*, vol. 40 (1967).
- BROGAN, Hugh, *History of the United States* (London, 1985).
- BROWN, Ralph Adams, *The Presidency of John Adams* (Lawrence, 1975).
- BUEL, Richard *Securing the Revolution: Ideology in American Politics, 1789-1815* (Ithaca, 1972).
- BURKE'S PEERAGE LTD., "American Families with British Ancestry" (Supplement). *Burkes Landed Gentry of the British Empire* (London, 1939).
- BURTON, John, *William Cobbett: Englishman, A Biography* (London, 1997)
- COGLIANO, Francis D., "We all hoisted the American Flag: American National Identity Amongst Prisoners in Britain During the Revolution." *Journal of American Studies*, vol. 32 (1998).
- COOKE, W., "The Fragile Balance: John Adams on Liberty and Equality", *Modern Age*, vol. 37 (1995).
- CORNELL, Saul, "Aristocracy Assailed: The Ideology of Back-country Anti-Federalism", *Journal of American History*, vol. 4 (1990).
- CURTI, Merle, *Human Nature in American Thought* (Madison, Wisconsin, 1980)
- DAGGER, Richard, *Civic Virtue: Rights, Citizenship and Republican Liberalism* (New York, 1997).
- DAUER, Manning, *The Adams Federalists* (Baltimore, 1968).
- DAUER, Manning, "The Political Economy of John Adams", *Political Science Quarterly*, vol. 56, (1941).
- DIGGINS, John, *The Lost Soul of American Politics* (New York, 1984).
- DRAPER, Theodore, *The Struggle for Power, the American Revolution* (Boston, 1996).
- DUTTON, Richard, (compiler), *The Lineage of the Adams Family of Massachusetts*. (Unpublished, 325 Beal Parkway, Ft. Walton Beach, Florida, 1998).
- ELKINS AND MCKITRICK, *The Federalist Era* (New York, 1993).
- ELLENBOGEN, Paul D., "Another Explanation for the Senate: The Anti-Federalists, John Adams, and the Natural Aristocracy", *Polity*, vol. 29 (1996).
- ELLIOT, (ed.), *Debates on the Constitution* (Ayer, 1987).
- ELLIS, Joseph J., *Passionate Sage: the Character and Legacy of John Adams* (New York 1993).
- FARRELL, James M., "New England's Cicero: John Adams and the Rhetoric of Conspiracy" *Proceeding of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, vol. 104 (1992).
- FERLING, John, *John Adams: A Life* (New York, 1996).
- FORMISANO, Ronald, "Deferential-Participant Politics: the Early Republic's Political Culture, 1789-1840," *American Political Science Review*, vol. 63 (1974).



- GREENE, Jack P. (ed.), *The American Revolution: Its Character and Limits* (New York, 1987).
- HARTZ, Louis, *The Liberal Tradition in America: An Interpretation of American Political Thought Since the Revolution* (New York, 1955).
- HIGONNET, Patrice, *Sister Republics: The Origins of French and American Republicanism* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1988).
- HARASZTI, Zoltan, *John Adams and the Prophets of Progress* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1952).
- HETCHMAN, Ralph "France and American Politics 1763-1793", *Political Science Quarterly*, vol. 78 (1963).
- HIBBERT, Christopher, *Red Coats and Rebels: The War for America* (London, 1990).
- HITCHENS, Christopher, *Blood, Class and Nostalgia: Anglo-American Ironies* (London, 1990).
- HOWE, John, *The Political Thought of John Adams* (Princeton, 1966).
- HOWE, John, "Republican Thought and the Political Violence of the 1790s" *American Quarterly*, vol. 19 (1967).
- HUTSON, James H., "John Adams' Titles Campaign", *New England Quarterly*, vol. 41 (1968).
- JACOBSON, David L. *The English Libertarian Heritage* (San Francisco, 1994).
- JAMES, Lawrence, *The Rise and Fall of the British Empire* (Boston, 1994).
- JENSEN, Merrill, *The American Revolution Within America* (New York, 1974).
- JOHNSON, Paul, *A History of the American People* (London, 1997).
- KETCHAM, Ralph (ed.), *The Anti-Federalist Papers and the Constitutional Convention Debates* (New York, 1986).
- KERBER, L. K., *Federalists in Dissent: Imagery and Ideology in Jeffersonian America* (Ithaca, 1970).
- KRAMNICK, Isaac, "Republican Revisionism Revisited", *American Historical Review* vol.87 (1982).
- KRUMAN, Marc, *Between Authority and Liberty: State Constitution Making in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill, 1997).
- KURTZ, Stephen G., *The Presidency of John Adams and the Collapse of Federalism, 1795-1800* (Philadelphia, 1957).
- LANGGUTH, A. J. *Patriots, The Men who Started the American Revolution* (New York, 1988).
- LIDDLE, William, "'A Patriot King, or None' Lord Bolingbroke and the American Renunciation of George III", *Journal of American History*, vol. 65 (1979).
- LOVEJOY, David S., *The Glorious Revolution in America* (Hanover, New Hampshire, 1972)
- MADISON, James et al., *The Federalist* (London 1996).
- MAIER, Pauline, *From Resistance to Revolution, Colonial Radicals and the Development of American Opposition to Britain* (New York, 1991).
- MATTHEWS, Richard, *The Radical Politics of Thomas Jefferson: A Revisionist View* (Lawrence, 1986).
- MERRIAM, Charles Edward, *American Political Thought* (New York, 1903).
- MITCHELL, Mitchell, *The Price of Independence* (New York, 1974).
- MORGAN, Edmund S., *The Birth of the Republic 1763-1789* (3rd Edition), (Chicago, 1992).
- MORGAN, Edmund S., *The Meaning of Independence* (New York, 1978).

- MORSE, A.D., "The Politics of John Adams", *American Historical Review*, vol. 4 (1899).
- NELSON, William, *The American Tory* (Oxford, 1961).
- NOLL, Mark A., *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada* (London, 1992).
- PETERSON, *Adams and Jefferson: A Revolutionary Dialogue* (Oxford 1978).
- PANGLE, Thomas, *The Spirit of Modern Republicanism: The Moral Vision of the Founding Fathers and the Philosophy of Locke* (Chicago and London, 1988).
- PIERSON, Karen *A Tale of Two Cities: Worcester England and Worcester Massachusetts* (Woonton Almeley, 1998).
- POCOCK, J.G., *The Machiavellian Moment* (Princeton, 1975).
- RICHARDSON, James D., *A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents 1787-1897* (New York, 1897-1917).
- RICKS, Christopher and VANCE, William (eds.) *The Faber Book of America* (Faber, London 1992).
- RIPLEY, Randall B., "Adams, Burke and Eighteenth century Conservatism", *Political Science Quarterly* vol. 80 (1965).
- ROSSITER, Clinton, "The Legacy of John Adams", *Yale Review*, vol. 46 (1957).
- RYERSON, Edward "On John Adams", *American Quarterly*, vol. 6 (1954).
- RYERSON, Richard "Like a Hare before the Hunters' John Adams and the Idea of Republican Monarchy", *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society* vol. 107 (1995).
- SAINSBURY, John, *Disaffected Patriots: London Supporters of Revolutionary America 1769-1792* (Toronto, 1987).
- SALTMAN, Helen Saltzberg, "John Adams's Earliest Essays: The Humphrey Ploughjogger Letters", *William and Mary Quarterly* (3rd series) vol. 37 (1980).
- SEITZ, Raymond, *Over Here* (London, 1998).
- SHALHOPE, R., "Toward a Republican Synthesis: the Emergence of an Understanding of Republicanism on American Historiography" *William and Mary Quarterly* (3rd series) vol. 29 (1972).
- SHARP, J.R., *Politics in the Early Republic* (New Haven, 1993).
- SHEPHERD, Jack, *The Adams Chronicles: Four Generations of Greatness* (Boston, 1975).
- SKOWRONEK, Stephen, *The Politics President's Make, Leadership from John Adams to George Bush* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1993).
- SMITH, David G., *The Convention and the Constitution: the Political Ideas of the Founding Fathers* (New York, 1987).
- SMITH, Page, *John Adams*, (2 Vols.) (New York, 1962).
- STEWART, Donald, *The Opposition Press in the Federalists Era* (New York, 1969).
- STOURZH, G., *Hamilton and the Idea of Republican Government* (Stanford, 1970)
- TAYLOR, Robert J. (ed.), *Massachusetts, from Colony to Commonwealth - Documents on the Foundation of its Constitution, 1775-1780* (Chapel Hill, 1961).
- THOMPSON C.B., "Young John Adams and the New Philosophical Rationalism" *William and Mary Quarterly*, vol. 55 (1998).
- TOCQUEVILLE, Alexis de, *Democracy in America* (J.P.Mayer [ed.] George Lawrence [Translator] London, 1994).
- TUCKERMAN, Henry T., *America and Her Commentators*, (New York, 1970).

- VIERECK, Peter R.E., *Conservatism: From John Adams to Churchill* (Westport, Connecticut, 1978).
- WOOD, Gordon, *The Creation of the American Republic 1776-1787* (Chapel Hill, 1969, 1998)
- WOOD, Gordon, "Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style: Causality and Deceit in the Eighteenth Century", *William and Mary Quarterly*, vol. 39 (3rd series) (1982).
- WOOD, Gordon, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York, 1991).
- WRIGHT, Esmond, "Alexander Hamilton", *History Today*, vol. 7 (1957).

