Chapter One

John Adams: The Life and the Biographers

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In the early twenty-first century, after generations of neglect, John Adams's historical reputation experienced a renaissance. Not only was he the subject of a prize-winning biography (McCullough, 2001), but that book also became the basis for an Emmy Award-winning 2008 HBO television mini-series. Even so, most Americans do not remember Adams for the reasons that he would have wished. Adams's place in historical memory is founded on perceptions of him as a character, an American version of Winston S. Churchill – by turns gruff, voluble, irritable, neurotic, and polysyllabic, yet blessed with courage, a self-mocking sense of humor, and a wondrous marriage. The things for which he hoped to be remembered – his contributions to the theory and practice of constitutionalism, his labors for independence, his role in negotiating the Treaty of Paris of 1783, and his averting of a war with France in 1800 – remain of concern principally to academia. Even though Adams may offer posterity unpalatable but necessary lessons, the clash between the Adams of historical scholarship and the Adams of historical memory persists.

That divide defines this chapter's organization. It first presents a concise life of John Adams, from his birth in 1735 as the oldest son of a colonial Massachusetts family to his death in 1826 as an American sage and patriarch of the Revolution. It then assesses portrayals of Adams in biographies and monographs. In sum, it first examines the history that John Adams made, and then studies what history has made of John Adams (see Peterson, 1998).

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1.1 The Life

John Adams was born on October 19, 1735, OS (Oct. 30, NS calendar), in Braintree, Massachusetts, the oldest of three sons of Deacon John Adams (1691–1761) and Susanna Boylston Adams (1709–1797). His father was a farmer, shoemaker, deacon of his church, and holder of various offices in local government and the militia. His mother, eighteen years younger than his father, was the daughter of an eminent minister who belonged to a prominent Massachusetts family.

Little is known of Adams's childhood beyond the reflections and anecdotes preserved in his unfinished *Autobiography* and his *Diary*. A healthy, sturdy child, he enjoyed exploring the land surrounding his father's farm. Educated by local tutors, at first he had little interest in schooling. The elderly Adams left two colorful but clashing versions of the battle between his father and himself over going to school. John insisted that he wanted only to be a farmer. Deacon Adams proposed that John do the hard work of a farmer. In one version, after a few days of toil, John capitulated and agreed to go to school; in the other version, John insisted that he liked the farmer's life well, to which Deacon Adams growled, "Ay, but I don't like it so well." Whichever version is correct, John took to his studies after his father transferred him to a school run by Joseph Marsh; it was then that he acquired his first book, a selection of Cicero's *Orationes* in which he scribbled, "John Adams His Book 1749/50."

Deacon Adams intended his eldest son to become a minister, a goal requiring John to earn a degree from Harvard College. In return for his father's paying his college tuition, John agreed that this payment would represent his share of his father's estate. Harvard ranked him fourteenth of the twenty-five matriculating students, based on "dignity of family." While at Harvard, John began a diary, which he kept, on and off, for the rest of his life, as a means of critical self-examination. Achieving distinction in his studies, he received his BA degree in 1755.

Accepting a post as a schoolmaster in Worcester, John pondered the choice among "Divinity, Law, or Physick." Having witnessed the ordeal of Rev. Lemuel Bryant, whose liberal theological views had so incensed his congregation that they put him on trial in Deacon Adams's parlor, John realized that his veering from the Calvinistic doctrines of his Congregationalist upbringing might subject him to Bryant's fate. He also felt an increasing attraction to law as a subject of study and as a means to develop his gifts of reasoning, writing, and oratory.

In 1756, Adams signed a contract with Worcester's only lawyer, James Putnam, under which Putnam would supervise his legal studies for two years. Teaching school by day while studying law at night, Adams pored over such standard treatises as the *Institutes* of the English jurist Sir Edward

Coke. Ranging beyond those texts, he also studied such legal and jurisprudential writers as Hugo Grotius and Samuel Pufendorf.

Adams found Putnam to be at best a passive mentor; after two years of largely self-guided study, he realized that he would have to forge a network of connections to support his bid to join the bar. He approached several established attorneys, the most important for his future being Jeremiah Gridley. Gridley questioned Adams about his studies and counseled him to pursue the study of the law rather than the gain of it; he then sponsored Adams's admission to the bar of Suffolk County (including Braintree and the city of Boston).

After a few false starts, including losing his first case because he had worded a writ incorrectly, Adams gained ground as a lawyer. By the mid-1760s, he was in demand throughout the colony. Admitted as lawyer and barrister to the province's highest court, the Superior Court of Judicature, he vigorously advocated professionalization of the Massachusetts bar. On Gridley's death in 1767, Adams absorbed much of the older man's practice.

Having established himself as a lawyer, Adams was ready for the next major step in his life. On October 25, 1764, after two years of courtship, he married Abigail Smith (1744–1818), daughter of a local minister and member of one of the area's leading families. Cementing this extraordinary marriage was their rich, eloquent correspondence, made necessary by Adams's frequent absences from home, caused first by the demands of riding circuit and then by his political career. Some biographers minimize the couple's stormy conflicts over John's absences from home and his frequent failures to write home. Nonetheless, these two intelligent, strong-willed people formed a remarkable partnership, owing as much to their political and philosophical harmony as to their love for each other. Throughout his life, Abigail was John's most trusted advisor; indeed, she often was a sterner, tougher-minded politician than he was.

As he recognized in his old age, the American Revolution transformed John Adams's life, creating new career paths for him and other Americans (Morgan, 1976). Adams was drawn early into the controversy. In 1761 (as he recalled in his autobiography), as a young lawyer observing court sessions, he was entranced by the brilliant lawyering of James Otis against the writs of assistance (M.H. Smith, 1978; Farrell, 2006). British officials saw writs of assistance – warrants granting customs officials unrestricted power to search anywhere they wished and to seize anything they deemed evidence or contraband – as valuable tools for customs enforcement, but Otis condemned them as violating the constitutional rights of Englishmen.

In 1765, Adams joined a legal reading and debating society organized by Jeremiah Gridley. Responding to that year's Stamp Act crisis, he presented an essay to this "sodality" that won praise from the other members. He published "A Dissertation on the Canon and Feudal Law," as a series of four newspaper articles; they were reprinted in London later that year and

in 1768 appeared as a book (G.S.Wood, 2011a: 114–125, 130–136). Expounding the colonists' view of the unwritten British constitution and its protections of the rights of Englishmen in America as well as in the mother country, Adams warned that British policy was bringing tyranny to America, just as the ancient, dangerous alliance between canon law and feudal law had tyrannized England. Declaring, "Let us dare to read, think, speak and write," Adams issued an eloquent call to his countrymen to defend their liberties, invoking the synthesizing habits of thought of the transatlantic Enlightenment and Anglo-American constitutional argument. In the fall of 1765, the Braintree town meeting adopted his draft instructions to the town's representatives to the Massachusetts legislature spelling out opposition to the Stamp Act (G.S. Wood, 2011a: 125–128):

> We further recommend the most clear and explicit Assertion and Vindication of our Rights and Liberties, to be entered on the Public Records; that the World may know, in the present and all future Generations, that we have a clear Knowledge and a just Sense of them, and, with Submission to Divine Providence, that we never can be Slaves. (G.S. Wood, 2011a: 128)

Printed in the *Massachusetts Gazette*, these instructions circulated through the province and at least forty other towns adopted them.

The "Dissertation" and the "Braintree Instructions" won Adams a reputation as an advocate of resistance to unconstitutional British policies. His second cousin Samuel Adams practiced a different kind of leadership in the same cause (Irvin, 2003; Maier, 1972, 1980), but John was disturbed by Samuel's radical, bottom-up activism and wary of his ultimate goal; John believed that Samuel was aiming at independence, a step he then found unwarranted and dangerous. His preferred means of action was to set forth the colonists' constitutional case with his pen.

In early 1770, a violent clash between British forces occupying Boston and an unruly Boston crowd thrust John Adams into the spotlight. On March 5, 1770, a detachment of British soldiers shot five Bostonians dead in what became known as the Boston Massacre. Indicted for murder, the soldiers and their commanding officer retained John Adams as lead defense counsel, with the young attorney Josiah Quincy. Adams's defense helped to win the acquittal on all charges of Captain Thomas Preston and six of the eight soldiers; two were convicted of the lesser crime of manslaughter, saving them from the gallows (Zobel, 1970; Reid, 1974; Archer, 2010). Despite his fears, his role in that trial did not damage his reputation; indeed, Samuel Adams and other radicals were delighted that John had demonstrated Massachusetts's commitment to the rule of law. Nonetheless, in 1771, Adams fell ill, the first case of a lifelong pattern in which illness succeeded severe professional or personal stress; moving his family back to Braintree, he withdrew from public life for a year.

In 1773, Adams drafted the answers of the Massachusetts House of Representatives to Governor Thomas Hutchinson, who in his opening address to the legislature and a follow-up address defended parliamentary supremacy over the colonies (Reid, 1981; G.S. Wood, 2011a: 234–250, 268–283). This debate returned Adams to the intellectual leadership of Massachusetts resistance. Though the House elected him to the governor's council, Hutchinson vetoed his election.

At the end of 1773, opponents of British policy rallied against the Tea Act and the British government's efforts to assist the floundering East India Company by shipping cut-rate tea to the colonies. On the ministry's theory, the tea's price was so low as to camouflage the threepenny tax on tea. Instead, on December 16, 1773, Bostonians disguised as Native American warriors stormed the tea ships anchored in Boston Harbor, broke open their holds, and dumped the tea into the harbor. When in early 1774 Parliament learned of this Boston Tea Party (Labaree, 1964; Carp, 2010), it enacted a set of statutes, the Coercive Acts, to punish Boston and Massachusetts for destroying company property and resisting the tea tax.

Responding to these punitive measures, delegates from twelve of the thirteen colonies gathered in Philadelphia in September 1774 as the First Continental Congress. John Adams, Samuel Adams, Robert Treat Paine, and Thomas Cushing represented Massachusetts, winning praise for their tact and deference to other colonies. On his return home, John penned twelve learned newspaper essays answering a series of essays by "Massachusettensis" (the pen-name of Daniel Leonard, though Adams at first thought Jonathan Sewall to be the author) defending British policies. Adams's essays, signed "Novanglus;" set forth his most thorough statement of the American position on the constitutional dispute with Britain (G.S. Wood, 2011a: 327–349, 352–556, 559–614).

In May of 1775, after the battles of Lexington and Concord, Adams returned to Philadelphia to attend the Second Continental Congress, emerging as a vigorous advocate of independence. When in June Congress created the Continental Army, Adams nominated Virginia delegate George Washington to command it. While the Continental Army faced British forces near Boston, Congress adopted a last appeal to George III as an impartial "patriot king" duty-bound to mediate the claims of all his subjects. Though skeptical of this "Olive Branch Petition," Adams nonetheless signed it with his colleagues on July 5, 1775. On July 24, however, he wrote to his friend James Warren mocking the petition's draftsman, John Dickinson of Pennsylvania, as "a certain great Fortune and piddling Genius … [who] has given a silly cast to our whole Doings" (G.S. Wood, 2011b: 14). After the British captured Adams's letter and published it, Dickinson and his allies ostracized Adams. Nonetheless, Adams served on dozens of congressional committees as well as on the Massachusetts provincial council, demonstrating his commitment to the American cause.

The collapse of colonial governments in late 1775 and early 1776 left a void of legitimate government. For months, Adams answered requests for advice about restoring constitutional government from such colleagues as Richard Henry Lee, John Penn, and Jonathan Dickinson Sergeant. In April 1776 he distilled his advice into a pamphlet. *Thoughts on Government* was a terse, eloquent manual for devising state constitutions (G.S. Wood, 2011b: 49–56). Extolling "the divine science of politicks" and counseling that "good government, is an empire of Laws" (G.S. Wood, 2011b: 49, 50), Adams prescribed a constitution creating a bicameral legislature balanced by an independent governor armed with ample powers.

Thoughts on Government also answered Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*, published in January 1776. Though Adams admired and endorsed Paine's case that American independence was necessary, justified, and feasible, he scorned Paine's rejection of checks and balances and separation of powers as flying in the face of experience (G.S. Wood, 2011b: 44–46). Writing to Abigail on March 19, 1776, he observed, "This Writer has a better Hand at pulling down than building" (G.S. Wood, 2011b: 45).

In May, Adams built on *Thoughts on Government* by framing a resolution authorizing the colonies to form new constitutions; the Second Continental Congress adopted this resolution on May 10, adding on May 15 his justificatory preamble (G.S. Wood, 2011b: 68–69). Adams regarded this resolution as the substance of independence. In June of 1776, following the introduction by Richard Henry Lee of Virginia of three resolutions demanding independence, Adams was named to the committee assigned to frame a declaration of independence. Urging his friend Thomas Jefferson to prepare the draft, he became Congress's leading advocate for independence and supporter of Jefferson's Declaration (Maier, 1997). On July 2, 1776, Congress adopted Lee's resolutions; two days later the body adopted a revised version of Jefferson's draft Declaration (G.S. Wood, 2011b: 89–91, 91–93). On the night of July 2–3, exalted by his victory, Adams wrote to Abigail: "[T]hrough all the Gloom I can see the Rays of ravishing Light and Glory. I can see that the End is worth more than all the Means. And that Posterity will tryumph in the Days Transaction, even altho We shall rue it, which I trust to God We shall not" (G.S. Wood, 2011b: 93).

Up to this point, Adams's political ideas revolved around Anglo-American constitutionalism as informed by classical political thought going back to Aristotle. Though on occasion, as in *Thoughts on Government*, he seemed to endorse what later generations call American exceptionalism, Adams argued for an exceptionalism of opportunity rather than the view that Americans were inherently different from other peoples past or present. While extolling Americans and the chance they had to make their success a blessing to humanity, Adams still maintained that Americans were subject to the same internal and external forces that shaped and corrupted human nature, and that they still had to guard against falling prey to these dangers.

Adams became one of the Continental Congress's workhorses, serving on many committees and chairing dozens. In particular, he worked with Benjamin Franklin, John Dickinson, Robert Morris, and Benjamin Harrison V to frame a model treaty for the United States. This plan distilled the idealism that Adams hoped would guide American foreign relations, seeking the goal of free and reciprocal trade among the signing nations while avoiding American entanglement in European affairs (G.S. Wood, 2011b: 113–124). At other times, however, Congress filled him with frustration. On April 26, 1777, he vented this frustration by writing to Abigail, "Posterity! You will never know, how much it cost the present Generation, to preserve your Freedom! I hope you will make a good Use of it. If you do not, I shall repent in Heaven, that I ever took half the Pains to preserve it" (Butterfield et al., 1963: 2.223–224).

In late 1777, Congress assigned Adams his first diplomatic mission, based on his work on the model treaty and his mastery of the foreign policy issues facing the United States (Ferling, 1994a). Benjamin Franklin, Silas Deane, and Arthur Lee represented the United States in Paris, seeking a treaty of alliance with France. Responding to charges of incompetence and corruption that the prickly, distrustful Lee brought against Deane, Congress recalled Deane and named Adams to replace him. After a harrowing transatlantic voyage with his 10-year-old son John Quincy Adams, Adams arrived in April 1778 to find that Franklin already had negotiated the treaty. Adams worked hard to establish a role for himself in Paris; he systematized the mission's paperwork and finances, sent home news of European developments, and provided a needed third vote to avoid deadlock between Franklin and Lee, who detested each other.

Adams worked well with Franklin, as he had while they served in Congress (Ferling, 1994a), though he could not see the point of Franklin's subtle, indirect practice of diplomacy at dinner parties and soirees. As American fortunes suffered in 1778 and 1779, Adams increasingly worried about what he saw as Franklin's undue deference to the French and his slipshod administration of American affairs. Believing that a diplomat should be an attorney for his country, Adams brought the mindset of a seasoned litigator to the subtle, delicate sphere of diplomacy. Also, despite his cordial relations with Franklin, Adams took Lee's part in the festering controversy over Silas Deane. Further, as a Protestant New Englander, he shared his region's longstanding distrust of the French; he also became suspicious of the French foreign minister, the comte de Vergennes. In turn, Vergennes was suspicious of Adams, influenced by reports from Conrad Alexandre Gerard, the French minister to the United States, that Adams was secretly pro-British. In addition, Adams's blunt demands that France do more for the Americans exasperated Vergennes. Acting through Gerard, Vergennes induced Congress to rescind the three-man commission and name Franklin sole American minister to France. Having no role in Paris, Adams returned to America.

Soon after his arrival in Boston in August of 1779, Adams was elected as a delegate to the Massachusetts constitutional convention. That body, the first specially created to frame a constitution, named John Adams, Samuel Adams, and James Bowdoin as a drafting committee. After this committee assigned the drafting task to John Adams, he prepared the most eloquent and carefully devised state constitution yet adopted (Reid, 1980; R.J. Taylor, 1980; G.S. Wood, 2011b: 249–277;. Adams rejected the tendency of the first wave of Revolutionary constitution-making to exalt the legislature while cutting back the powers and independence of the executive and judiciary. Developing the plan of *Thoughts on Government*, Adams's draft established a bicameral legislature, a powerful governor elected by direct popular vote, and an independent judiciary. Following the example of Virginia's 1776 constitution, Adams prefaced his draft constitution with an elaborate declaration of rights – more accurately, a declaration of right principles including provisions recognizing individual rights and defining the citizen's duties or responsibilities. Adams had to return to Europe before the convention finished its labors, though he kept careful watch over the constitution's ratification and subsequent history. *Thoughts on Government* and the Massachusetts constitution of 1780 shaped all later American constitution-making, as to both a constitution's content and the manner of its framing and adoption, including the US constitution in 1787–1788.

By contrast to his achievements as a constitution-maker, Adams's work as a diplomat plunged him into difficulties personal and political. In February of 1780, he returned to France with a congressional commission to open peace talks with Britain, but his arrival, and his aggressive lobbying of Vergennes, agitated the Frenchman and strained Franklin's good humor. Adams and Vergennes clashed over whether and when to inform the British of his mission; Adams also sought from Vergennes a passport to the Netherlands for a mission seeking an alliance and financial aid – but Vergennes delayed issuing the passport till the summer, when he may have granted it as a means to get rid of Adams. Negotiating with the Dutch authorities while shuttling between Holland and Paris, Adams secured Dutch recognition of American independence and crucial Dutch loans to the United States (Schulte Nordholt, 1981, 1982). He also wrote two series of essays for European publications presenting the American case for independence (G.S. Wood, 2011b: 340–387, 392–442).

Returning to Paris in mid-1781, Adams discovered that Congress (again at the behest of the French) had rescinded his sole appointment as peace commissioner and named Franklin, John Jay, Henry Laurens, and Thomas Jefferson to join him in conducting talks with Britain, instructing them to coordinate their efforts with France. Adams accepted this new arrangement, though he resisted the congressional mandate. At the same time, letters from Abigail, from his friend and political ally Elbridge Gerry, and from

James Lovell, a Massachusetts delegate to Congress, told him that Congress had recast the commission in part because of French influence and Franklin's machinations; Franklin had sent Congress the testy 1780 correspondence between Adams and Vergennes with Franklin's cover letter criticizing Adams's conduct. Increasingly distraught, Adams filled his diary with criticisms of Franklin's ethics, laziness, inefficiency, and deference to France (Ferling, 1994a: 245–247).

Of the five commissioners, only Franklin, Adams, and Jay negotiated the treaty; Laurens had been captured by the British, and Jefferson was unable to serve. Over the next eighteen months, the Americans pursued negotiations, punctuated by pauses for British diplomats to consult with superiors in London and for Adams to make an emergency trip to the Netherlands to negotiate further American loans. Returning from Holland in October 1782 at Jay's behest, Adams discussed the negotiations with Jay. Making common cause, they told Franklin that they would disregard Congress's instructions to take no action "without the knowledge and concurrence" of France. Though questioning their decision, Franklin concurred with it.

The product of these exhausting negotiations was the Treaty of Paris, agreed in preliminary form on November 30, 1782 and signed in final form on September 3, 1783 (G.S. Wood, 2011b: 689–698). Under this treaty, Britain recognized American independence and American fishing rights along the Newfoundland coast and ceded all territory between the Allegheny Mountains and the Mississippi River, doubling the new nation's size. The treaty also offset Loyalist claims for confiscated property in America against Americans' claims for property destroyed by British and Loyalist forces. In sum, the treaty was an American victory (Morris, 1965; Ferling, 1994a).

Following completion of the negotiations, Adams brooded over his future. Though eager to return home, he hoped that Congress might name him the first American minister to Great Britain. He believed that he had earned the appointment; he also hoped that his diplomatic labors, on top of his efforts in Congress, would earn him enduring fame, the ultimate reward for devoted labors for the public good. Though Adams shared this way of thinking with every leading member of the Revolutionary generation, Adams was more candid about it than most (Adair, 1974).

Adams spent most of 1783 fretting that Congress would neither recognize his past services nor give him any new diplomatic assignment. Instead, he feared, those prizes would go to Franklin or to Franklin's nominee. Haunted by reports from home of schemes in Congress against him spurred by Vergennes's agents and by Franklin, and unable to contain himself, Adams denounced Franklin in letters and private conversations. Insisting that he and Jay and not Franklin deserved principal credit for the treaty, he made Franklin the target of his disappointment and wrath. The New Englanders to whom he unburdened himself shared his views and echoed them back to

him, filling Adams with resentful vindication. Even so, Adams's explosions were extraordinarily indiscreet, illustrating his tendency to self-sabotage, confirming the doubts that many in Congress had of his judgment, and fueling the charge that he was vain and mentally unstable.

Adams's attempts to argue his case to Congress and to posterity backfired. It was almost impossible to practice national politics by letters sent across the Atlantic. Further, each letter Adams wrote defending himself seemed to most in Congress to reinforce the case against him. Finally, Franklin, a seasoned veteran of epistolary politics, knew how to get his revenge (Middlekauff, 1996). On July 22, 1783, his exasperation with Adams breaking through his genial veneer, Franklin complained to Robert R. Livingston, the Confederation's secretary for foreign affairs, about Adams's lack of discretion, adding, "I am persuaded however, that [Adams] means well for his Country, is always an honest Man and often a Wise One, but sometimes and in some things absolutely out of his Senses" (http://franklinpapers.org/franklin/framedVolumes.jsp). Franklin's letter soon became notorious, within Congress and among American politicians, pursuing Adams for the rest of his life (and thereafter) as the most devastating critique of him ever written.

Despite his desire to go home, and his December 1782 letter submitting his resignation to Congress, Adams stayed in Europe hoping against hope for news. Finally he learned that he had been named to act, with Franklin and Jefferson, to negotiate commercial treaties with such European powers as Prussia. In August 1784, after nearly five years apart, he and Abigail were finally reunited in London.

Several months later, Adams got the news he had long hoped for, and welcomed as validation and vindication: in early 1785, Congress notified him of his appointment as American minister to Great Britain. On June 1, he presented his credentials to George III and had a successful face-to-face audience with the king. Once that triumph was on record, however, Adams found his appointment a source of perennial frustration and disappointment. Try as he might, he could not induce the British to grant the United States "most favored nation" status, nor could he persuade the British to end their occupation of the western territories ceded to the United States under the Treaty of Paris. Finally, after two years of banging his head against a British wall, he wrote to Congress seeking permission to return home. In October of 1787, Congress granted his request, and he and Abigail sailed from Portsmouth in April of 1788.

While Adams struggled to carry out his diplomatic responsibilities, he also brooded over Europeans' condescension toward the Americans' experiments in government. He found particularly vexing a 1778 letter by the French economist and government official Anne Robert Jacques Turgot to the English dissenting clergyman and political activist Richard Price. Adams read this letter reprinted as an appendix to Price's 1784 pamphlet,

Observations on the American Revolution, and on the Means of Making It a Blessing to the World. Irritated by Turgot's insistence that checks and balances and separation of powers were not just unnecessary but pernicious mystifications, and that the people should concentrate all political authority in one center, Adams covered the pamphlet's margins with testy handwritten comments. Turgot's praise for the Pennsylvania constitution of 1776, which he extolled as the work of Franklin, exasperated Adams. Finally, news from America of the outbreak in Massachusetts in 1786 of Shays' Rebellion, a debtors' insurrection seemingly threatening the government whose constitution he had done so much to create, filled Adams with urgency (Szatmary, 1980; Gross, 1993).

In early 1787, the first volume of Adams's response to Turgot, *A Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States of America*, appeared in London and was reprinted in Philadelphia in time for the opening of the Federal Convention, the body that framed the constitution of the United States. Two more volumes followed within the year. This large, disorderly work ranged throughout Western political and constitutional history to support one theoretical point. Adams defended separation of powers and checks and balances as integral components of what he deemed to be the best constitutional government: a mixed republic with a two-house legislature and a powerful, independent chief executive, recreating the balance among the one, the few, and the many central to classical political thought. The history of every society, whether ancient, medieval, or modern, Adams insisted, taught the necessity of striking that balance among the three great orders. As he wrote at the close of Volume III:

> All nations, from the beginning, have been agitated by the same passions. The principles developed here will go a great way in explaining every phenomenon that occurs in the history of government. The vegetable and animal kingdoms, and those heavenly bodies whose existence and movements we are as yet only permitted faintly to perceive, do not appear to be governed by laws more uniform or certain than those which regulate the moral and political world. (C.F. Adams, 1850–1856: 6.218)

Adams wrote his book as part of his continuing effort to guide his countrymen's efforts to create sound constitutions, which he had begun in 1776 with *Thoughts on Government*. Adams also sought to strike a blow in America's war for intellectual independence, just as Thomas Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* defended America from the "natural degeneracy" thesis advocated by European *philosophes* led by the comte de Buffon. Like Jefferson, but in a different front of this intellectual war, Adams sought to set the *philosophes* straight.

Adams later bemoaned the *Defence*'s "want of method." Frantically compiling a sourcebook on comparative constitutional government, he left

himself almost no time to give his book the literary finish and clear organization of *Thoughts on Government*. Moreover, as with his *Novanglus* essays, Adams was so intent on refuting his adversaries point by point that only someone equally immersed in the writers whom he disputed could follow his argument.[1] The *Defence* won Adams praise and criticism – praise for his learning, criticism for his apparent embrace of corrupt European habits of thought, in particular his lack of hostility to monarchic and aristocratic government. Yet Adams's contemporaries failed to grasp that he was not advocating aristocracy but rather arguing, first, that every society had or would develop an aristocracy; second, that that aristocracy would seek to control the government to protect itself and extend its power; and, third, that the best way to meet this challenge was to give aristocracy a place in government but hem it in with constitutional safeguards so that it could do as little harm as possible.

While his countrymen argued about the *Defence*, John and Abigail Adams sailed home. When on June 17, 1788 their ship docked in Boston, Adams returned to a country significantly different from the one he had left nine years before. The United States had ratified the constitution proposed by the Federal Convention in 1787 – a document that in his view approximated the prescription for sound government in his *Defence*. Later that year, Adams was elected to represent Massachusetts in the last session of the Convention Congress, but he never took office, for his countrymen had another role for him.

In April 1789, Adams learned of his election as the first vice president of the United States, and of George Washington's unanimous election as the first president. Adams had received only 34 of the 69 electoral votes cast – outdistancing all other candidates, but falling short of the acclamation accorded Washington. On receiving word of his election, he journeyed to New York City, the new nation's first capital under the constitution, and on April 23, 1789 he was sworn in before the Senate; a week later, he attended Washington's inauguration. That occasion's confused protocol led him to betray the first signs of a self-damaging preoccupation with ceremony. At one point, anxious about his status as president of the Senate when Washington was present, he asked, "When the president comes into the Senate, what shall I be? … I wish gentlemen to think what I shall be" (Bowling & Veit, 1989: 5–6).

Vice President Adams accelerated the erosion of his reputation with two missteps. First, he launched a doomed effort to bolster the new government's dignity by proposing that Congress adopt titles of office. In particular, Adams insisted, the president required a grand title beyond "His Excellency," usually accorded to state governors. A committee of Senators proposed to call the president "His Highness the President of the United States of America, and Protector of Their Liberties." Though the Senate approved the proposal, it met a crushing defeat in the House, and Adams became a

laughing-stock. The only title emerging from this debacle was "His Rotundity," bestowed on Adams to ridicule his stout physique.

Second, though Adams sought to be a kind of senatorial prime minister, the senators made clear that he was merely their presiding officer, with power only to decide questions of procedure and break tie votes. Painfully, he learned to restrain his impulses to expound to the senators what he had learned about procedure in parliament or about comparative constitutional government.

News of the French Revolution prompted Adams to take up his pen once more. In 1790, he began a series of newspaper essays commenting on a history of the sixteenth-century French civil wars by the seventeenth-century Italian historian Enrico Caterino Davila. He hoped that his *Discourses on Davila* would echo Niccolo Machiavelli's *Discourses on the First Ten Books of Titus Livius.* Again, however, he bounced from subject to subject, launching a disquisition on emulation and the desire for fame inspired by a passage from Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments.* His efforts to explain what he saw as the French Revolution's potentially disastrous consequences backfired. His foes cited the *Discourses* as further proof that he had forsaken republicanism for monarchism. Despite Adams's protests, even Jefferson concluded that Adams backed kingly government. When an American printer proposed to republish Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man*, Jefferson sent him the book with a friendly letter praising it as likely to refute "the political heresies which have sprung up among us." Jefferson was mortified when the printer used his private letter as a preface to Paine's polemic. Despite his apologetic explanations, the damage was done – the public saw Adams and Jefferson opposing each other, with Adams branded as an apologist for monarchy and aristocracy. Disgusted, in 1791 he discontinued his *Discourses on Davila*. It was his last sustained effort in political philosophy.

Adams's views of human nature had darkened since the early days of American independence. His growing pessimism had many sources: his stormy experience of representing his nation in indifferent or hostile European capitals; his exacerbated self-consciousness about his origins on the periphery of the Atlantic world; his bitter realization that Congress no longer followed the public-spirited standard of 1776; his sense of betrayal by Franklin and former colleagues in Congress; and his dismay at the turbulence of American politics as dramatized by Shays' Rebellion. If anything, the emergence of partisan divisions in the United States under the constitution intensified his pessimism.

Though Adams cast more tie-breaking votes in the Senate (29) than any other vice president, the partisan battles of the 1790s sidelined him. Abigail Adams's absence intensified John's sense of his own uselessness: citing her ill health, she returned to Braintree in 1792, not returning to Philadelphia for the rest of his term as vice president. As he wrote to her on December

19, 1793, "[M]y country has in its wisdom contrived for me the most insignificant office that ever the imagination of man contrived or his mind conceived" (Letter from John Adams to Abigail Adams, Dec. 19, 1793).[2]

Following Washington's announcement that he would not seek a third term, Adams became the presidential candidate of the Federalist partisan alliance in the 1796 elections, with the diplomat Thomas Pinckney of South Carolina for vice president. Facing him were Thomas Jefferson and Senator Aaron Burr of New York, the choices of the Republican partisan alliance. Adams defeated Jefferson by 3 electoral votes, 71 to 68; Jefferson, not Pinckney, became Adams's vice president.

On March 4, 1797, John Adams was sworn in before a joint session of Congress as the new nation's second president. His inaugural address reintroduced himself to the American people as a warm supporter of the Revolution, a firm advocate of republican government, an admirer of President Washington, and a man seeking to transcend partisan divisions (Richardson, 1897: 1.218–222). Though this address was well received, Adams then and afterward felt overshadowed by Washington. Wanting to avoid the appearance of criticizing Washington, Adams retained his Cabinet, though its members were more loyal to Washington (secretary of war James McHenry) or to Hamilton (secretary of state Timothy Pickering and secretary of the treasury Oliver Wolcott) than to himself. Adams compounded his problems by treating the presidency as a part-time office. Solicitous of Abigail's delicate health, he spent months at a time in Braintree. His Cabinet, left to fend for itself, sought guidance from Hamilton, then a lawyer in private practice in New York. Driven by impatience with Adams and by his conviction that he knew what to do, Hamilton provided that guidance. Adams had created a recipe for trouble; not until late in his term did he realize that he was not leading his own administration.

The division in Adams's administration indicated that, rather than being a coherent and unified movement, the Federalists had split into so-called High Federalists aligned with Hamilton and Adams Federalists loyal to the president. Any issue highlighting the differences between the two groups might rupture the fragile Federalist partisan alliance (Dauer, 1953); too many issues had that potential.

Troubles with France plagued Adams's presidency almost from the beginning. In 1797, after the French refused to receive Charles C. Pinckney as American minister, Adams sought a peaceful resolution of French–American differences. His mission to Paris (Pinckney, John Marshall, and Elbridge Gerry) failed at the outset when three French officials (whom the Americans identified as X, Y, and Z) demanded bribes before opening talks. Rejecting this demand, Pinckney and Gerry sent Marshall home with their report. For once showing a shrewd grasp of public opinion, Adams kept it confidential until Republicans demanded its disclosure. Then he released the report, embarrassing the Republicans and infuriating the public against

France. As American and French naval vessels clashed in a "quasi-war," Adams for once savored national popularity.

Another aspect of the Adams administration's response to the crisis was more controversial. In 1798, Congress enacted four statutes – a Naturalization Act, an Aliens Act, an Alien Enemies Act, and a Sedition Act – modeled on statutes enacted by Great Britain in the early 1790s. The first three measures tightened immigration law, empowering the president to deport any resident alien whom he deemed hostile to the United States or who was a citizen or subject of a nation at war with the United States. The Sedition Act made it a federal crime to bring into disrepute the general government, either house of Congress, or the president – but not the vice president. The Sedition Act empowered the government to use the full force of law against critics of Adams or his administration – though it allowed defendants to prove the alleged sedition's truth and left the jury free to determine issues of law and fact (Smith, 1956). Biographers are divided on Adams's responsibility for these measures; even such ardent Federalists as Alexander Hamilton and John Marshall doubted the statutes' wisdom. By contrast, Abigail Adams was firmly convinced of the need to punish sedition, as she maintained in a testy 1804 correspondence with Jefferson. Like others backing the Sedition Act, she insisted that, as the government under the Constitution was still fragile, the reputations of those holding office under it were key to its success, and any criticism of those officials would not only injure their individual reputations but damage the constitutional system as a whole (Freeman, 2003).

Republicans led by Jefferson and Madison sought to counter these Federalist measures. Later in 1798, the Kentucky and Virginia legislatures denounced the Alien and Sedition Acts as unconstitutional. The Kentucky Resolutions (secretly written by Jefferson) asserted a state's power to declare federal statutes null and void within its borders (*nullification*); the more moderate Virginia Resolutions (secretly written by Madison) declared that a state had the power to interpose its authority between a federal law and any of its citizens prosecuted under that law (*interposition*). Though the other states rejected these resolutions, Kentucky and Virginia put the measures' constitutionality in dispute, in the process highlighting a major issue that Republicans would use against Adams's bid for a second term.

The Adams administration's preparations for war included organizing an army. Adams named Washington as the army's commander-in-chief – but without first asking him. This appointment led to a cascading series of misunderstandings and clashes. First, Washington was irked that Adams had not consulted him. Second, he insisted on conditions, including his freedom to name his own staff. Washington wanted three men to serve under him: Alexander Hamilton, his most trusted advisor; Henry Knox, who had commanded artillery under Washington during the Revolution and had been secretary of war under the Confederation and the Constitution;

and Charles C. Pinckney. Though Adams bridled at including Hamilton, the real issue was the order of seniority of the officers' commissions. Adams preferred to put Knox or Pinckney first; Washington made it clear that Hamilton was his first choice; Pinckney graciously offered to serve without regard to seniority; and Knox was so hurt by the controversy that he withdrew his name. The imbroglio exasperated Adams. Already doubting the quasi-war's wisdom, he now began to seek a means to avert a full-blown war with France. Secretly, he asked William Vans Murray, American minister to the Netherlands, to sound out the French about reopening negotiations.

Meanwhile, a federal tax enacted to raise revenue for the war sparked outrage in Pennsylvania. John Fries, a veteran of the Continental Army, organized a tax-resistance movement. After clashes pitting the insurgents against local authorities, state militia, and US marshals, Fries and twenty-nine other men were arrested and tried for treason and other crimes in a federal court; Fries and two others were convicted of treason and sentenced to hang. Adams reviewed the sentences, determined that Fries and the other convicted defendants had not committed treason as defined by the constitution, and pardoned them; he then issued a blanket amnesty. These generous measures came too late, however – Adams's administration had alienated Pennsylvania's German population by its punitive enforcement of the tax, and Pennsylvania's voters swung away from Adams and the Federalists (P.D. Newman, 2004).

Washington's death on December 14, 1799 freed Adams to reassess his presidency. In 1800, he disclosed his efforts to seek peace with France, accepting the demands by congressional Federalists that he send Chief Justice Oliver Ellsworth and North Carolina's Governor William Richardson Davie to join William Vans Murray. He also discovered that for months his Cabinet had been following Hamilton's leadership rather than his own. Enraged, he forced secretary of war McHenry to resign and fired secretary of state Pickering, replacing them with men loyal to him and sharing his views. His explosive face-to-face confrontation with Hamilton left each man convinced that the other was insane. Infuriated, Hamilton wrote an inflammatory pamphlet denouncing Adams as unfit for office. Intending to circulate his *Letter from Alexander Hamilton Concerning the Character and Conduct of John Adams, Esq., President of the United States* only to leading Federalists, he hoped to persuade them to abandon Adams for his running-mate, Charles C. Pinckney – but the pamphlet leaked to the newspapers, splitting Federalist ranks and injuring both Adams's and Hamilton's reputations (Freeman, 2001a).

The split between Adams Federalists backing the president and High Federalists backing Hamilton and Pinckney, together with growing public unhappiness with prosecutions under the Sedition Act and desire for peace with France, played into the hands of the Republicans, who again backed Jefferson and Burr. In the 1800 election, Adams and Pinckney garnered 65

and 64 electoral votes respectively, behind Jefferson and Aaron Burr, who tied at 73 votes each.

Wounded by his defeat, Adams found bitter amusement in the election's results, noting that Hamilton's efforts had elevated above him the two men he least wanted to be president. Some Federalists tried to make a deal with Burr because they thought him less doctrinaire than Jefferson. Jeffersonians demanded that Burr defer to Jefferson, which he was prepared to do, and that he deny that he was fit to be president by comparison with Jefferson, which he was *not* prepared to do. Rejecting what he saw as a dishonorable slap at his fitness for leadership, Burr began to entertain Federalist offers of support. Appalled, Hamilton begged Federalists not to back Burr – even at the price of accepting Jefferson's election (Freeman, 2001a: ch. 5).

Adams rejected suggestions that he remain in office until the House broke the deadlock; once the House resolved the deadlock in Jefferson's favor, Adams worked to ensure an orderly transfer of power. His actions during this crisis rendered a service to the nation and its constitutional system as great as that rendered by Washington in refusing to seek a third term. As Washington set a two-term precedent honored until the 1940s, Adams helped to ensure that ensuing presidential elections would be marked by peaceful transfers of authority and power from losers to victors.

And yet the closing months of Adams's presidency gave rise to a myth of political retribution against Republicans that damaged his reputation though it had only partial basis in fact. Since the beginning of government under the Constitution, the federal judiciary's structure posed problems for the judges and for the nation (Preyer, 2009). The Judiciary Act of 1789 created a three-layer court system, with the Supreme Court at its apex and specialized federal district courts at its base. In the middle were the federal circuit courts, trial-court workhorses staffed by each state's federal district judge and by Supreme Court justices riding circuit. Congress imposed circuit-riding on the justices both to give them something to do while the Supreme Court awaited the development of a caseload and to occupy them so that they would not be idle and thus a danger to the system.

Circuit-riding was onerous, however, sometimes endangering the justices' health. For a decade, the justices sought relief from this burden, to no avail. After the 1800 election, the lame-duck Federalist Congress seized the chance to mix judicial reform with partisan advantage. The 1801 Judiciary Act abolished circuit-riding and redesigned and enlarged the federal circuit courts; in the last two weeks of his term Adams nominated, and the Senate confirmed, loyal Federalists to these new offices (Preyer, 2009).

Even before Congress redesigned the federal judiciary, Adams faced a decision about the Supreme Court. In 1800, Chief Justice Ellsworth resigned, citing ill-health. At first Adams named John Jay (without consulting him) to his former post, and the Senate confirmed him. Jay declined to serve, however, citing the post's onerousness and the prevailing lack of

respect for the nation's courts. Learning of Jay's refusal, Adams named his secretary of state, John Marshall, to succeed Ellsworth. For once, an impulsive appointment by Adams succeeded far better than he had hoped.

Adams did not attend Jefferson's inauguration, leaving the capital very early on March 4, 1801. There is no evidence that he refused to attend out of spite; historians may confuse John Adams's failure to attend Jefferson's inauguration in 1801 with John Quincy Adams's refusal to attend Andrew Jackson's inauguration in 1829. Adams's cordial letters to Jefferson in early 1801 do not support the idea that he was boycotting Jefferson's swearing-in. Two family reasons may explain his departure. First, Abigail's frail health and her dislike for the capital had confined her to Braintree for weeks. Second, on November 30, 1800, their son Charles died at the age of 30 from alcoholism, leaving a wife and two small children.

Humiliated by his defeat, embittered by what he saw as Hamilton's dangerous ambition and Jefferson's deviousness, and heartbroken by his son Charles's death, Adams spent the first years of his retirement writing his *Autobiography*, though he never finished it. In 1805, aghast at his old friend Mercy Otis Warren's description of him in her *History of the Rise, Progress, and Termination of the American Revolution* (M.O. Warren, 1988), Adams wrote her a series of hurt, angry letters defending himself; Warren, a prolific author and one of the first historians of the Revolution, defended her book, but the correspondence did not heal the breach between them (C.F. Adams, 1878a). In 1809, Adams began a series of newspaper articles for the Boston *Patriot*, a defense of his public career against Hamilton's 1800 pamphlet that he continued for three years (Freeman, 2001a: ch. 3). Finally, Adams continued or restarted correspondence with such old friends from the Revolution as Benjamin Rush (Schutz and Adair, 1966). These letters and autobiographical writings focused Adams's attention on how posterity would remember him, prompting on occasion written explosions of hurt, resentment, and envy against patriotic icons such as Washington, Franklin, and Jefferson.

Noting signs in Adams's letters that he was mellowing toward Jefferson, Rush, who valued his friendship with both men, urged them to reconcile their differences. The thin-skinned Jefferson rejected the idea (Schutz and Adair, 1966: 200–202). Writing on Christmas Day 1811, Adams mocked Rush's suggestion, asking what reason either man would have to write to the other, but hinting, "Time or chance, however, or possibly design, may produce ere long a letter between us" (Schutz and Adair, 1966: 202). The "time" was one week. True to his word, on New Year's Day 1812, Adams sent Jefferson a gentle, friendly letter hinting at the delivery of a gift, two pieces of "homespun" from a person in whose education Jefferson had taken an interest (the gift was a two-volume set of lectures on rhetoric and oratory by John Quincy Adams, then Boylston Professor of Rhetoric at Harvard). Jefferson eagerly wrote back, launching one of the great correspondences in American history (Cappon, 1959; Peterson, 1976).

Adams wrote nearly four letters to Jefferson for every one that Jefferson wrote to him. Hungry for an intellectual sparring partner, he baited Jefferson on politics past and present, as when he wrote on July 13, 1813:

> The first time that you and I differed in opinion on any material Question was after your arrival from Europe, and that point was the French Revolution. You was well persuaded in your own mind that the Nation would succeed in establishing a free Republican Government: I was as well persuaded, in mine, that a project of such a Government, over five and twenty millions of people when four and twenty millions and five hundred thousands of them could neither write nor read, was as unnatural irrational and impracticable; as it would be over the Elephants Lions Tigers Panthers Wolves and Bears in the Royal Menagerie, at Versailles. (Cappon, 1959: 358)

At the same time, he happily shared with Jefferson his extensive reading on comparative religion and his musings on the classics, philosophy, the nature of aristocracy (the subject of another extensive correspondence with the Virginia agrarian writer John Taylor of Caroline), and such questions as whether they would be willing to live their lives over again. Both men often discussed the history of the Revolution, their own places in it, and the conflict between posterity's need to understand that history and the forces depriving posterity of reliable historical knowledge. Adams's letters display the intellectually venturesome, playful, and self-mocking facets of his personality that have endeared him to later generations. Jefferson's letters are graceful miniature essays, modeled on Cicero's letters to his friend Atticus, a body of Roman literature that both men treasured.

In 1818, Adams reported to Jefferson that Abigail had fallen gravely ill; on October 28, 1818, before Jefferson even received Adams's letter, Abigail Adams died, three days after their fifty-fourth wedding anniversary. Jefferson learned the news from the press and wrote an eloquent condolence letter that touched Adams's heart.

The letters that Adams wrote in retirement form a remarkable mix of wisdom, humor, learning, combativeness, and occasional sourness about his own historical reputation and his likely fate at posterity's hands. In some ways, Adams began to recover his youthful optimism about America, though he still disputed Jefferson's views on American exceptionalism, insisting that Americans were not exempt from the forces that had shaped human nature and experiments in government throughout history.

Two issues on which the two statesmen's ideas converged were religion and the relationship between church and state. Having left behind the Congregationalism of his ancestors as a young man, in his old age Adams embraced Unitarianism. By contrast with Jefferson's deist Unitarianism, Adams's was a Christian Unitarianism preserving belief in a personal deity, Jesus as the redeemer of humanity, and the miracles of the New Testament

as true (Holmes, 2006: 73–78). Further, as a Quincy delegate to the Massachusetts constitutional convention of 1820, he tried but failed to rewrite the 1780 constitution to provide that "all men of all religions, demeaning themselves peaceably, and as good subjects of the Commonwealth, shall be equally under the protection of the law."[3] His service in that convention was the closing act of a political career that had begun more than half-a-century before. The convention delegates elected him president, an honor that he declined on account of his age (Journal, 1821: 9–10); when he entered the hall for the first time, the other delegates stood, their heads uncovered, as a mark of respect.[4]

Despite their increasing frailty, both men were determined to see the fiftieth anniversary of American independence, on July 4, 1826. Jefferson died first, early in the afternoon; Adams died several hours later, murmuring, "Thomas Jefferson survives." Americans regarded the news that these two great men had died on the same day, the fiftieth anniversary of the Declaration, as providential – a sign that the torch was passing from the Revolutionary generation to their successors.

1.2 The Biographers

Scholarship on John Adams falls into three categories – editions of his writings and papers; biographies and character studies (books focusing on key themes of the subject's psychology or personal qualities); and monographs studying his constitutional or political thought or key periods or themes in his life and thought. The balance of this essay groups these works accordingly.

Editions of Adams's Writings and Papers

Until modern times, all studies of John Adams have depended on *The Works of John Adams, Esq., Second President of the United States*, edited by Charles Francis Adams and published in ten volumes (1850–1856). In 1829, John Quincy Adams had started writing a life of John Adams after his defeated 1828 bid for a second term as president, but he set it aside after his election to the House of Representatives in 1830, with only seven chapters written. Charles Francis Adams had trained himself in documentary editing with selected volumes of John and Abigail Adams's Revolutionary era correspondence (C. F. Adams, 1840). When John Quincy Adams died in 1848, Charles Francis Adams revived the project. The first two volumes of the *Works* present the completed biography. The remaining eight volumes contain John Adams's *Diary* and unfinished *Autobiography*, his major political works, and a selection of his letters and speeches.

The *Works* both fostered and constricted understanding of John Adams. Although, as L. H. Butterfield noted, Charles Francis Adams was "a gifted and painstaking editor, well in advance of the standards of his day" (Butterfield et al., 1975: 11), he also was a nineteenth-century Boston Brahmin who, discomfited by his grandfather's earthiness and his idiosyncratic spelling and capitalization, regularized and sanitized Adams's prose, rendering Adams chilly, formal, and pompous. Compounding this problem, the Adams family closed the Adams papers to research for more than a century, pointing scholars to the *Works*. Most modern selections of Adams's writings (Koch and Peden, 1946; Peek, 1954; C.B. Thompson, 2000; Carey, 2000; Diggins, 2004) still use the *Works* as their source.

In 1956, the Adams Manuscript Trust transferred the Adams papers to the Massachusetts Historical Society, host of *The Adams Papers* project, founded in 1954. This landmark donation opened the Adams papers to scholarly research. The first major beneficiary was Lester J. Cappon's fine edition of the correspondence between John and Abigail Adams and Thomas Jefferson (Cappon, 1959). *The Adams–Jefferson Letters* is a landmark of American literature as well as historical scholarship and documentary editing; among its virtues, it reintroduced modern readers to the human side of John Adams.

The first letterpress installment of *The Adams Papers* appeared in 1961 – L. H. Butterfield's edition of John Adams's *Diary* and *Autobiography* (Butterfield 1961, 1966). This publication received extraordinary media attention, including serialization in *Life* magazine and many appreciative reviews, including a review for the *American Historical Review* by President John F. Kennedy (J.F. Kennedy, 1963). Next came L. Kinvin Wroth's and Hiller Zobel's edition of John Adams's legal papers (Wroth and Zobel, 1965), ten volumes of Adams family correspondence (Butterfield et al. 1963–); *The Book of Abigail and John*, which contains selections from the Adams family's correspondence between 1776 and 1784 for the American Revolution's bicentennial (Butterfield et al., 1975); sixteen volumes of John Adams's general correspondence and papers (R.J. Taylor, 1977–); a study of the portraits of John and Abigail Adams (Oliver, 1967); and *My Dearest Friend*, a selection from the correspondence of John and Abigail (Hogan and Taylor, 2007). The Adams Papers have four series – series I, "Diaries"; series II, "Family Correspondence"; series III, "General Correspondence and Other Papers of the Adams Statesmen"; and series IV, "Adams Family Portraits." In 2011, Gordon S. Wood presented the most thorough, scholarly selection of Adams's writings available, a two-volume *Revolutionary Writings* based on the volumes of the Adams Papers devoted to John Adams and covering the period between 1755 and 1783 (G.S. Wood, 2011a, 2011b).

The next major publication of Adams material appeared in 1966, when John Schutz and Douglass Adair published a selected edition of the

correspondence between John Adams and Benjamin Rush – *The Spur of Fame: Dialogues of John Adams and Benjamin Rush, 1805–1812* (Schutz and Adair, 1966). Based on an 1892 limited edition of the Rush–Adams correspondence (Biddle, 1892), this carefully annotated selection by two distinguished historians cast new light on Adams's and Rush's ideas of fame and their preoccupation with posterity's understanding of the Revolution.

Biographies and Character Studies

In writing the life of John Adams, biographers face a great advantage and an equally great challenge. Adams was a prolific writer who often reflected on his own life and his emotional makeup. Further, in assessing his life, Adams was preoccupied by his desire for justice from posterity and his fear that posterity would deny him the enduring fame granted to Washington, Franklin, and Jefferson. These emotions drove him to exaggerate his contributions' merit and significance and the ways that contemporaries assessed him. At the same time, he often mocked himself, as when he noted to Benjamin Rush on July 23, 1806, that Washington, Franklin, and Jefferson had a great gift that he lacked – the gift of silence (Schutz and Adair, 1966: 59–61). Readers of biographies of Adams should keep these cautionary points in mind.

The first biography of John Adams was a reverent summary by the geographer and historian Rev. Jedidiah Morse (1761–1826), reprinted from Morse's *American Geography* as a preface to the third edition of Adams's *Defence of the Constitutions*, issued in 1797, after his inauguration as president (J. Adams, 1797).

The next contributions to biographical literature on Adams were the memorial orations delivered after Adams's and Jefferson's deaths in 1826, treating them together. Later orators discussed Adams in addressing the shift from the founding generation to the generation of those charged with preserving the founders' legacy. The most valuable oration of this group, delivered on January 4, 1859 in Boston, was the work of the Unitarian clergyman, author, and abolitionist Theodore Parker (1810–1860). Parker's illuminating miniature biography shows rare sensitivity to Adams's psychology. Unpublished during his lifetime, it first appeared in his 1870 book *Historic Americans* (Parker, 1870).

The appearance in the 1850s of *The Works of John Adams*, including the biography by Charles Francis Adams, established the conventions of Adams biography for decades thereafter. Oddly, the greatest scholar among Adams's descendants, the historian, essayist, and memoirist Henry Brooks Adams (1838–1918), never wrote about his famous ancestor, though he scandalized his students at Harvard by calling John Adams a demagogue. He even began his greatest historical work, *The History of the United States*

during the Administrations of Thomas Jefferson and James Madison (1889–1896), with six chapters on "The United States in 1800" that fail to mention President John Adams even once (Henry Adams, 1984a, 1984b).

The other nineteenth-century biographers of John Adams were content to restate the conventional biographical wisdom as defined by his grandson. John Robert Irelan, a physician and author, published an eighteen-volume history of the American Republic, devoting each volume to a different president (Irelan, 1886). The prolific biographer John T. Morse (1840–1937) wrote his biography (J.T. Morse, 1898) as part of the *American Statesmen* series that he edited between 1898 and 1916. Finally, Mellen Chamberlain (1820–1900), librarian of the Boston public library, delivered an 1884 address, "John Adams, statesman of the American Revolution" (Chamberlain, 1898), tinged with his era's ethnocentric and racialist rhetoric and arguing for the central roles of Adams and New England in the creation of the United States.

The first scholar to write an intellectually distinguished life of John Adams was the French-born intellectual historian Gilbert Chinard (1881–1972). Chinard had won fame as a Jefferson scholar, especially for his widely read biography (1929). Turning from Jefferson to Adams, Chinard, deeply impressed with what he found, wrote a thoughtful, affectionate biography, *Honest John Adams* (1933), assessing him as statesman, political thinker, and revolutionary, and praising him as the most realistic American statesman of his generation. Chinard paid Adams the great compliment of taking his ideas and his personality seriously. For decades Chinard's biography stood as the best life of Adams, and it still maps the prevailing currents of Adams scholarship. Because he had no access to the Adams papers, however, he based his book on the *Works*. Thus, while remaining enlightening and valuable, *Honest John Adams* shows its age, given the outpouring of primary sources and scholarship since its publication. Standing in contrast to Chinard's work is *John Adams and the American Revolution*, by the popular biographer Catherine Drinker Bowen (1950). Her admiring book's chief flaw is her frequent resort to fictionalized passages; further, despite its title, it extends only to 1776.

The opening of the Adams papers was a catalyst for a wide range of biographical and historical scholarship. The massive two-volume biography published in 1961 by Page Smith of the University of California at Berkeley was the first based on the microfilm edition of the Adams papers (Page Smith, 1962). Smith's book won a Bancroft Prize and was widely praised as definitive, but other scholars faulted its scanty attention to Adams's ideas, its failure to hold Adams's public and private lives in coherent balance, and its diffuseness (see especially Garraty, 1963).

In 1976, Peter Shaw, a professor of English at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, published *The Character of John Adams*. Acknowledging Adams as a constitutional and political theorist, and tracing

continuities between Adams's personality and psychology and his constitutional and political ideas, Shaw used the latter to illuminate the former. Though giving his readers valuable insight into Adams as a human being, Shaw inadvertently obscured Adams's intellectual labors. Well documented and beautifully written, Shaw's book is enlightening but limited in its assessment of Adams.

More than three decades after Page Smith's biography, John E. Ferling of West Georgia College, a specialist in the military history of the Revolution and a biographer of George Washington, published *John Adams: A Life* (Ferling, 1992), the first full-length biography since 1961. Ferling emphasized John Adams's inner life and psychology but sought with considerable success to strike a balance between Adams's public and private lives. Ferling followed up his valuable study with a bibliography of Adams (1994b).

Joseph J. Ellis of Mount Holyoke College published *Passionate Sage: The Character and Legacy of John Adams* (1993) a year after Ferling's biography. Perhaps Ellis's best book, *Passionate Sage* examines Adams's life along the lines of Peter Shaw's character study. Again, it is not a full biography, nor does it plumb the depths of Adams's political and constitutional thought, though it effectively illuminates Adams in his later years.

The acclaimed popular historian David McCullough (2001) made his first venture into the era of the American Revolution with his massive one-volume life of John Adams. Though his best-selling book won the Pulitzer Prize and inspired an acclaimed 2008 HBO mini-series, historians faulted it for its uncritical stance towards Adams and its failures to take him seriously as a political thinker and constitutional statesman or to engage with the growing body of Adams scholarship.

Four years after McCullough's biography, the financial journalist James Grant published *John Adams, Party of One* (2005). Ranking with the books by Chinard, Shaw, Ellis, and Ferling, this excellent book is grounded in the primary sources, in the burgeoning Adams scholarship, and in the profusion of recent scholarly work on the American Revolution and the early republic.

Monographs

The first monograph focusing on John Adams appeared in 1915, when the economist and political scientist Correa M. Walsh published *The Political Science of John Adams.* Analyzing the structure and coherence of Adams's political thought, Walsh also rejected it, arguing that separation of powers and checks and balances were irrelevant to modern problems. Walsh's book won praise for its rigor, but attracted criticism for its divorce of Adams's political thought from his life.

The next monographic study of John Adams, appearing nearly four decades after Walsh's study, remains one of the most innovative studies in

Adams scholarship and the history of ideas. Zoltan Haraszti, keeper of rare books at the Boston Public Library, explored the collection of Adams's books deposited in his library's rare book collection. In *John Adams and the Prophets of Progress* (1952), Haraszti used Adams's marginal notations, particularly those from the 1790s and early 1800s, to illuminate his evolving political thought. Appearing almost simultaneously with Haraszti's book was *John Adams, Scholar*, by Alfred Iacuzzi, a professor of Italian at Brooklyn College, which covered much of the same ground but from a different perspective, stressing Adams's gift for foreign languages and his wide and extensive reading (Iacuzzi, 1952).

On the heels of Haraszti's and Iacuzzi's monographs came a cornerstone work of political history informed by political science – Manning J. Dauer's *The Adams Federalists* (Dauer, 1953). Dauer illuminated historical understanding of politics in the 1790s by tracing the evolution of a factional split between so-called High Federalists, led by Hamilton, and more moderate "Adams Federalists," backers of John Adams. Dauer both reflected and cut against prevailing currents of analyzing the early republic's political history. Like many of his colleagues, Dauer sought to illuminate the origins of American political parties, yet at the same time he showed how the politics of the 1790s was more complicated than the conventional, stark dichotomy between Federalists and Republicans.

In the mid-1960s, two scholars re-examined Adams's political thought. Edward Handler of Babson College published *America and Europe in the Political Thought of John Adams* (Handler, 1964). Reflecting the influence of Louis Hartz's *The Liberal Tradition in America* (Hartz, 1955), Handler echoed Hartz's contention that America was the first liberal nation, not having known a feudal or quasi-feudal past, while also reacting against Hartz's thesis; the book is as much about Hartz as it is about Adams. Two years later, John R. Howe, Jr., a professor of history at the University of Minnesota, published *The Changing Political Thought of John Adams* (1966), long regarded as the most useful study of Adams's political thought. Howe traced a line of development from an early, radical Adams to an increasingly conservative Adams, though at times implying that he was examining Adams's political thought for insight into his psychology rather than for its independent significance.

Adams had to wait more than two decades for the next monograph analyzing his political thought. *John Adams and the Spirit of Liberty*, by the political scientist C. Bradley Thompson (1998), appeared in the University Press of Kansas series "American political thought". The first sustained examination of Adams's political thought since John Howe's monograph and the first to stress its coherence and consistency since Correa Walsh's study, Thompson's award-winning book analyzes Adams's political writings from his early newspaper essays through his *Discourses on Davila*. Its strength is that Thompson takes Adams seriously as a political thinker; its weakness is that Thompson champions Adams across the board, rather than trying to

understand his strengths and his weaknesses. As a companion volume, Thompson edited *The Revolutionary Writings of John Adams* (2000).

After the ponderous tome of John Henry Irelan (1886), three scholars addressed Adams's presidency. In 1957, Stephen G. Kurtz published a lively, perceptive history situating Adams's presidency within the emerging partisan battles of the 1790s. Nearly twenty years later, Ralph Adams Brown published his study in the University Press of Kansas's *American Presidency* series, offering a ringing defense of Adams against critics past and present (Brown, 1975). In 2003, John Patrick Diggins, professor of history in the graduate school of the City University of New York, wrote on John Adams for a series on the American presidents edited by the late Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.. Ranging beyond the presidency, Diggins took Adams seriously as a political thinker and a politician. Though often insightful, his book is also flawed by chronological errors and eccentric interpretations undermining its reliability. Diggins also published a volume of selection from Adams's writings, *The Portable John Adams* (2004).

As a contribution to the commemoration of the American Revolution's bicentennial, the leading Jefferson biographer Merrill D. Peterson delivered an elegant set of lectures (1975) on John Adams's relationship with Thomas Jefferson. Peterson characterized their correspondence as "a Revolutionary dialogue," and traced their lifelong argument about the meaning of the Revolution in their time and for posterity (see also Allison, 1966; Koch, 1963).

Other focused monographs on John Adams include James H. Hutson's *John Adams and the Diplomacy of the American Revolution* (1980), which seeks to explain Adams's achievements and failings as a diplomat by reference to his psychology; Linda Dudik Guerrero's *John Adams' Vice Presidency, 1789–1797: The Neglected Man in the Forgotten Office* (1982). the only close-focus examination of Adams's ordeal as vice president though defending Adams rather than understanding him; and Walt Brown, Jr.'s study of the president's relationship with the American press (1995).

Many scholars and writers have published new accounts of the presidential election of 1800. The most useful are the symposium volume edited by James Horn, Jan Ellen Lewis, and Peter S. Onuf (2002); the histories by John E. Ferling (2004), Susan Dunn (2004), Edward J. Larson (2007), Bernard A. Weisberger (2000), John Zvesper (2003), Garry Wills (2003), and James Roger Sharp (2010); and a valuable article and book chapter by Joanne B. Freeman (1999, 2001a). These volumes join the older study by Daniel J. Sisson (1974) focusing on republican political ideology.

Two valuable collections of essays were spawned by conferences organized by the Massachusetts Historical Society: *John Adams and the Founding of the Republic*, edited by Richard Alan Ryerson (2001); and *The Libraries, Leadership, and Legacies of John Adams and Thomas Jefferson*, edited by Robert C. Baron and Conrad Edick Wright (2010).

Other historical studies include notable chapters on Adams. For example: Joseph Dorfman (1946) situated Adams within the evolving economic history of American civilization. Joseph Charles (1956) juxtaposed Adams and Jefferson in his *Origins of the American Party System: Three Essays.* H. Trevor Colbourn (1965) used Adams to illustrate the scope, depth, and uses of historical thought in Revolutionary America. Gordon S. Wood (1969, 2004) examined Adams's political thought in the 1770s and 1780s as a counterpoint to the development of American political thought in the same period. Richard B. Morris (1973) included Adams among his seven portraits of leading American founders as revolutionaries. Douglass Adair (1974) made Adams the focal point of his anatomization of the relationship between history and democratic theory in the American founding. In a sparkling series of lectures, Edmund S. Morgan (1976) assessed the meaning of independence for Adams, Washington, and Jefferson, an enterprise that John E. Ferling (2000) pursued in greater depth. Robert Middlekauff (1996: ch. 7) presented a fascinating analysis of the Franklin–Adams relationship in a study of Franklin's enemies. Joanne B. Freeman investigated the long series of self-justifying newspaper essays that Adams published between 1809 and 1811 in the Boston *Patriot* to illuminate "paper war" as a method of political combat in the early Republic (Freeman, 2001a: chs. 3 and 5), and examined the election of 1800 as "an honor dispute of epic proportions" (Freeman, 1999). Andrew S. Trees (2004) analyzed Adams's struggles with the challenges of creating a constitutional and political order that would sustain the virtue of the people and those whom they chose to lead them. Darren Staloff (2005) distinguished among Hamilton's, Adams's, and Jefferson's approaches to the Enlightenment in his examination of the politics of the Enlightenment and the American founding. And David L. Holmes (2006) wrote an illuminating, terse assessment of Adams's religious views. Readers also should consult a valuable series of articles by James M. Farrell (1989, 1991, 1992b, 1994, 2002, and 2006) tracing Adams's lifelong fascination with the Roman statesman Marcus Tullius Cicero.

Finally, though further discussion appears in this volume on Abigail Adams (Chapters 10 and 11), this historiographical overview notes a growing literature dealing with the marriage of John and Abigail Adams. This scholarship was made possible by the extraordinary correspondence between them, which in turn was made necessary by their frequent separations due to John Adams's public service at home and abroad and Abigail Adams's periods of illness in her later years. This genre began in 1876 with Charles Francis Adams's edition of their *Familiar Letters* (1876), issued for the centennial of American independence with modern annotations by the late Frank Shuffelton as a Penguin Classic (Shuffelton, 2004); a comparable volume published by *The Adams Papers* and based on accurate modern transcripts of the documents is *My Dearest Friend* (Hogan and Taylor,

2007). The leading study is the fine joint biography by Edith Gelles (2009), joining her previous pathbreaking studies of Abigail Adams (1992, 1998). More recently, Joseph J. Ellis published *First Family: Abigail and John Adams* (2010) and the historian G. J. Barker-Benfield published *Abigail and John Adams: The Americanization of Sensibility* (2010). Interested readers also should consult the Bancroft Prize-winning life of Abigail Adams by Woody Holton (2009).

1.3 Conclusion

This historiographical examination of John Adams reveals an irregular rhythm of publications keyed to the appearance of documentary editions and to the changing emphases of American historical scholarship. Until the twentieth century Adams has not been a favorite subject for historians or biographers; even after the increasing attention to Adams's life and work, the bifurcation between the Adams of scholarship and the Adams of popular culture remains firmly in place. Why should this be so?

The first reason, as noted, is the Adams family's closing of the Adams papers until the 1950s. Not until the 1960s did a scholarly edition of Adams's papers begin to supplant the only previous edition and to make previously unpublished papers available.

Second, Adams never fit the partisan dichotomy that captured the imagination of posterity and American political historiography. Ideological adherents of Jefferson and Hamilton have long traced an unbroken lineage of intellectual and political descent to their respective parent sources. By contrast, Adams never had a band of intellectual and political heirs claiming him as a forebear. So too, as noted, historians' emphasis on political parties' origin and development works to the disadvantage of Adams, who was wary of party and, as one biographer wrote, constituted a "party of one" (Grant, 2005).

Third, the issues and policies associated with Adams shape his treatment by scholars and popular writers alike. For example, when constitutional origins and their intellectual contexts become focal points for historical scholarship, work on Adams has flourished. By contrast, when the origins and development of political parties have taken the fore, scholars have relegated Adams to the sidelines, focusing instead on the Federalists led by Hamilton and the Republicans led by Jefferson and Madison. Finally, the Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798 are generally seen as the greatest blot on Adams's presidency. Given the growing attention to civil liberties in public discourse and historical scholarship, these measures increasingly appear as the first grave threat to American civil liberties, damaging the historical standing of the president who signed them into law (Smith, 1962). Not until recently have historians sought to understand the ideas and assumptions undergirding the 1798 Sedition Act (Freeman, 2003) or the public controversy that

they engendered (Bradburn, 2008). By contrast, though Adams nominated John Marshall to the Supreme Court in early 1801, launching the career of the man deemed the greatest chief justice of the United States, the veneration accorded Marshall almost never touches the man who appointed him. Instead, Adams gets undeserved blame for the "midnight judges" (a catchphrase popularized by Jeffersonian Republicans at the time and by Jefferson scholars for generations thereafter), while Marshall almost appears to be a self-created titan of American law and constitutionalism.

Adams himself would have argued that his constitutional and political thought, and its effects on American constitutional government, warranted his claim to fame – and yet only scholars remember him for these achievements. An illuminating perspective on this vexed question appears in the most influential short discussion of John Adams and constitutionalism. Gordon S. Wood maintains, in "The Relevance and Irrelevance of John Adams," chapter 14 of his classic study *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776–1787* (1969), that in the 1780s Adams drifted away from the defining currents of American political thought. Adams continued to think and argue within the context of classical political thought, in which the people and the government are opposed, and society falls into the immemorial categories of the one, the few, and the many. By contrast, most Americans accepted the idea of popular sovereignty, under which the people rule themselves through a government devised and elected by and responsible to them. By winning independence, Americans believed, they had purged themselves of monarchy and aristocracy and were working to tame and constitutionalize democracy. Thus, in their eyes, Adams was increasingly irrelevant to the evolving nature of American constitutional democracy. And yet being outside the currents of American political thought, Wood added, conferred insight on Adams as well as seemingly consigning him to irrelevance. Wood concluded that, from his intellectual vantage point, Adams was better able to see and expound on aspects of American life that his countrymen did not see or chose not to acknowledge – specifically, the persistence of a functional equivalent of aristocracy in a seeming democracy. Thus, Wood praised Adams for his realistic grasp of truths that his countrymen were unprepared to learn. We are left with a brilliant Adams who is nevertheless out of step (whether rightly or wrongly) with both Americans and other contemporary leaders. To some extent, Adams scholarship has yet to recover from Wood's brilliant yet faint praise.

In a superbly insightful essay meditating on Adams's statecraft, Stephen G. Kurtz (1968) marked out a sensible, thoughtful approach. Kurtz points out that, although Adams's political and constitutional thought is less original than some have supposed, Adams never claimed originality; rather, he was committed to distilling and expounding what he deemed to be the lessons of history. In that enterprise, Adams was true to the synthesizing habits of thought associated with the Enlightenment, and (as Kurtz notes)

to the rhetorical and argumentative tactics of the skilled and learned attorney. As an attorney overcomes his adversary with a mass of authorities, Adams sought to overcome his intellectual and constitutional adversaries by piling up examples, authorities, and the lessons of experience.

Building on the insights afforded us by Kurtz and Wood, we can see how these currents of thought, argument, and inquiry come together in John Adams's life and work. As an exemplar of the Enlightenment, Adams's insistence on the lessons of experience points to the centrality to his legal, political, and constitutional thought of an empirical exploration and sifting of history. Though Adams was fascinated by the study of human nature, he approached that subject always by considering how an understanding of human nature emerges from studying how it made itself felt in the record of history. Given that he always understood human nature historically, it was only natural that he should reject the idea (beloved by his adversary Thomas Paine and his sometimes-friend, sometimes-adversary Thomas Jefferson) that Americans were inherently exceptional by contrast with the rest of humanity. Whatever exceptionalism Adams recognized in the American story was one of opportunity only, and the uses to which Americans could put that opportunity were both defined and limited by their not being free of the strengths and weaknesses of human nature as revealed by history. Adams's historical empiricism and his applications of it, united with the forensic skills that he honed first in the courtroom, then in pamphleteering, and finally in his ponderous works of comparative constitutionalism and his sparkling letters, comprise the legacy that he hoped to leave posterity, and for which he wanted to be remembered.

Notes

1 For an analysis of the rhetorical design of the *Defence*, see Paynter (1996).
2 This is an electronic edition: *Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive*, Massachusetts Historical Society. At www.masshist.org/digitaladams/, accessed Nov. 10, 2012.
3 *Journal of Debates and Proceedings in the Convention of Delegates, Chosen to Revise the Constitution of Massachusetts, Begun and Holden at Boston, November 15, 1820, and Continued by Adjournment to January 9, 1821. Reported for the Boston Daily Advertiser*. Boston, MA: 209; see also p. 193.
4 *Journal of Debates…*: 11–12.

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