

Adams, John (19 Oct. 1735-4 July 1826), second president of the United States, diplomat, and political theorist, was born in Braintree (now Quincy), Massachusetts, the son of John Adams (1691-1760), a shoemaker, selectman, and deacon, and Susanna Boylston. He claimed as a young man to have indulged in "a constant dissipation among amusements," such as swimming, fishing, and especially shooting, and wished to be a farmer. However, his father insisted that he follow in the footsteps of his uncle Joseph Adams, attend Harvard College, and become a clergyman. John consented, applied himself to his studies, and developed a passion for learning but refused to become a minister. He felt little love for "frigid John Calvin" and the rigid moral standards expected of New England Congregationalist ministers.

Adams was also ambitious to make more of a figure than could be expected in the local pulpits. So despite the disadvantages of becoming a lawyer, "fumbling and racking amidst the rubbish of writs . . . pleas, ejections" and often fomenting "more quarrels than he composes," enriching "himself at the expense of impoverishing others more honest and deserving," Adams fixed on the law as an avenue to "glory" through obtaining "the more important offices of the State." Even in his youth, Adams was aware he possessed a "vanity," which he sought to sublimate in public service: "Reputation ought to be the perpetual subject of my thoughts, and the aim of my behaviour."

Adams began reading law with attorney James Putnam in Worcester immediately after graduation from Harvard College in 1755. He remained there for three years, teaching school to support himself. He disliked the job but learned from his pupils the germ of his lifelong theory that all societies create some sort of aristocracy that needs to be guarded: like the world itself, a school contained "kings, politicians, divines, . . . fops, buffoons, fiddlers, sycophants, fools, coxcombs, chimney sweepers, and every other character drawn in history or seen in the world" in miniature. After he returned to Braintree, he was presented to the Boston bar by [Jeremiah Gridley](#) and Oxenbridge Thacher in November 1758 and was sworn in as an attorney. He prepared so rigorously that he fell gravely ill in Worcester; he was cured by adhering to a diet of milk, bread, and vegetables he would turn to for the rest of his life when ill.

The Stamp Act Crisis (1765)

Adams practiced law and served in town offices in Braintree for the next several years, winning an unprecedented vote of thanks from the town for his two-year stint as selectman. He first came to wider attention during the Stamp Act crisis of 1765, when he published a number of essays in the *Boston Gazette* that were then collectively printed as *A Dissertation on the Canon and Feudal Law* (1765). He denounced these two forms of law as keeping most of humanity in "sordid ignorance and staring timidity . . . by infusing in them a religious horror of letters and knowledge." Adams stressed an educated, politically active populace such as America enjoyed as essential for the maintenance of a free government: "Liberty cannot be preserved without a general knowledge among the people, who have a right, from the frame of their nature, to knowledge."

In 1765 Adams also drafted the Braintree Resolves, which were circulated throughout Massachusetts as a model for other towns. He derived the satisfaction of having the town direct his political rival, conservative assemblyman Ebenezer Thayer, to argue that the Stamp Act

"divest[ed] us of our most essential rights and liberties," since the colonies were not "in any sense" represented in the British Parliament.

In 1768 Adams moved to Boston, where his activity in the patriot cause quickened. He was selected to defend [John Hancock](#), whose ship *Liberty* was seized for smuggling wine. Given Hancock's obvious guilt, Adams rested most of his case on the facts that Americans were not represented in the Parliaments that had passed the Acts of Trade and were tried without juries when accused of violating them. Fearful of the consequences if Hancock were convicted, the Crown attorney let the case drop. In 1769 Adams defended a seaman named Michael Corbet, who killed a lieutenant from a naval press gang in self-defense. Adams was enraged when Chief Justice [Thomas Hutchinson](#) declared Corbet innocent before he could even present the critique of impressment he had prepared. Hutchinson's "secret motives were two. 1st. to prevent me from reaping an harvest of glory; 2d. to avoid a public exhibition of the law in all its details before the people." By this date, Adams had joined his cousin [Samuel Adams](#) and other Boston leaders in thinking Hutchinson intended to destroy Massachusetts's liberties and served as the hidden hand behind British policy. He was also sure Hutchinson was personally committed to ruining his career. As he remarked when Hutchinson refused to open Massachusetts's courts in the aftermath of the Stamp Act riots, because the stamps required for legal documents had been destroyed: "I was but just getting into my gears, just getting under sail, and an embargo is laid upon the ship."

The Boston Massacre Trial

The most famous of Adams's cases was the Boston Massacre trial. In company with [Josiah Quincy](#), he defended British captain Thomas Preston and seven soldiers accused of murder for their role in the 5 March 1770 incident. Although Adams later claimed that he lost half his practice and heard "our names execrated in the most opprobrious terms whenever we appeared in the streets of Boston," in fact the patriot leaders were happy to see the soldiers represented by two of their own: Samuel Adams even supported his cousin's successful election to the General Court in May 1770. First, Adams and Quincy could show that the resistance leaders stood up for justice even in partisan cases; and perhaps even more important, they could defend the redcoats without inquiring into whether the "massacre" was provoked by patriot leaders who had arranged for the mob to show up. Adams presented just such a defense, emphasizing that the mob was composed of "a motley rabble of saucy boys, Negroes and mulattoes, Irish teagues, and outlandish jack tars" and that the soldiers were in terror of their lives "when the multitude was shouting and hazzaing, and threatening life, the bells ringing, the mob whistling, screaming, and rending an Indian yell; the people from all quarters throwing every species of rubbish they could pick up in the street." Aided by the fact that at least some of the jurors were government sympathizers, six of the soldiers were acquitted, and two were convicted of manslaughter, for which they pleaded "benefit of clergy," were branded on the thumb, and released.

Adams suffered a severe illness or nervous breakdown for much of 1771 and 1772 and bade a temporary "farewell [to] politics" before admitting, while taking a cure at the mineral waters in Stafford Springs, Connecticut, to "grow[ing] weary of this idle, romantic jaunt." He returned to Boston in time to serve as the consultant for the Committee of the General Court, which in 1773 refuted Governor Hutchinson's speeches that no line could be drawn between the sovereignty of Parliament and the independence of the colonies. It was also Adams who suggested in 1774 that

Superior Court judges willing to be paid by the Crown rather than by vote of the General Court were abrogating the Massachusetts charter and hence constitution, were guilty of high crimes and misdemeanors, and deserved to be impeached.

Adams's Commitment to Independence

By the time the General Court elected him to the First Continental Congress in June 1774, Adams enjoyed a reputation as the most learned lawyer in Massachusetts who supported the patriot cause. He was already committed to independence, a position he later claimed first crossed his mind as early as the French and Indian War, when he learned of the arrogance with which British regulars treated provincial soldiers. As early as 1772 he had written in his diary that "there was no more justice left in Britain than there was in hell--that I wished for war."

Adams and his fellow New England delegates were disappointed in the First Continental Congress, which met in September 1774 and did not go beyond approving of nonimportation from Britain pending repeal of the "Coercive Acts," which closed the port of Boston, restructured the Massachusetts government, and gave the Ohio Valley to Canada. A frustrated Adams wrote, "We have been obliged to act with great delicacy and caution," given the other delegates' belief they were fanatics for independence. "We have been obliged to keep ourselves out of sight, and to feel pulses, and to sound the depths; to insinuate our sentiments, designs, and desires by means of other persons."

Beginning in December 1774, when he had returned home, Adams engaged in a protracted pamphlet controversy as "Novanglus" in refutation of Loyalist [Daniel Leonard's](#) "Massachusettensis," which ran for five months in the Boston papers. Adams insisted that Parliament had no power over the colonies, and America owed only a conditional, contractual allegiance to the king. This had always been so, he argued: "The patriots of this province desire nothing new; they wish only to keep their old privileges." Adams recounted in great detail how a new notion of absolute parliamentary sovereignty had emerged in the 1760s with Governors [Francis Bernard](#) and Hutchinson, who were abetted in their conspiracy against American liberty by an England "sunk in sloth, luxury, and corruption." Adams was unaware of the true identity of "Massachusettensis"; he believed him to be province attorney general [Jonathan Sewall](#), his erstwhile best friend. Sewall tried to convert Adams to the royal cause in 1768 with the promise of patronage. At their final meeting in July 1774, Adams replied with the famous words, "I have passed the Rubicon; swim or sink, live or die, survive or perish with my country--that is my unalterable determination."

Adams dominated the Second Continental Congress, to which he hastened immediately after the battles of Lexington and Concord. His first great service was to nominate [George Washington](#) to command the patriot forces, a position coveted by the militarily inexperienced Hancock of Boston. Before he stepped down in November 1777, Adams served on more than ninety committees, chairing twenty-five, including the all-important Board of War, which kept the army provisioned. "Every member of Congress in 1776 acknowledged him to be first in the house," wrote fellow delegate [Benjamin Rush](#).

Adams's most important political work of this period was *Thoughts on Government*, written early in 1776 to assist North Carolinians in framing a new constitution. While acknowledging that "virtue" was the foundation of all happy states, he went on to assail the direct democracy hinted at in [Thomas Paine](#)'s recently published and wildly popular *Common Sense* (1776). Asserting his lifelong predilection for mixed government, Adams insisted that the assembly be chosen by property holders, that it select a council from among its members, and that the two houses pick a strong executive who could veto their acts. A strong, independent judiciary was also necessary. "A people cannot be long free nor ever happy whose government is in one assembly," for a "single assembly is liable to all the vices, follies, and frailties of an individual." In perhaps the first case in which he cast himself as the unique bastion of virtue and wisdom between two opposing groups, Adams commented, "In New England the *Thoughts on Government* will be disdained because they are not popular enough; in the Southern colonies, they will be despised . . . because too popular." Adams here confirmed a behavior pattern that he evinced as early as 1763 and that he would follow for the rest of his life: to "quarrel with both parties and with every individual of each, before I would subjugate my understanding, or prostitute my tongue or pen to either."

Adams's main contribution at the Second Continental Congress was, as [Richard Stockton](#) and [Richard Henry Lee](#) called him, to serve as the "Atlas" of independence. In what he considered the finest speech of his life, which unfortunately does not survive, Adams persuaded the Congress of the need for a Declaration of Independence on the practical grounds it would unite the colonies, divide England, stimulate support for the Revolution, and attract European allies to "colonies" that were acting as independent states already by waging war and forming governments. "John Adams was our Colossus on the floor," [Thomas Jefferson](#) remarked. Adams was selected for the five-man committee to frame the Declaration but yielded to Jefferson's more graceful prose style and the ever-present need to deemphasize New England's predominance. In later years he expressed some jealousy that too much attention was paid to the Declaration, "a theatrical show," where "Jefferson ran away with all the stage effect . . . and all the glory."

In November 1777 an exhausted Adams returned home to Braintree, where his wife, the former Abigail Smith ([Abigail Adams](#)), whom he had married in October 1764, waited for him with four young children. A learned and intelligent woman who capably managed the Adams farmstead during her husband's long absences, Abigail was both a dutiful wife and an intellectual equal with whom her husband corresponded on affairs of state. She is famous for asking the Congress to "remember the ladies" in planning a new commonwealth dedicated to liberty and hinted that women might "foment a rebellion, and . . . not hold ourselves bound by laws in which we have no voice or representation." John's reply, "I cannot but laugh," dismissed Abigail's argument on the grounds men "have only the name of masters." To grant women political rights "would completely subject us to the despotism of the petticoat." If the Adamses disagreed on this issue, it did not mar a loving, supportive marriage, which ended only with her death in 1818. That John recommended women receive the same classical, liberal education as men, in contrast to the emphasis on music, dancing, and household arts [Benjamin Franklin](#) and Jefferson, among others, favored, is testament to the benefits a wife so educated conferred on him personally.

Adams did not stay at home long. In February 1778 he sailed to France, accompanied by his ten-year-old son, [John Quincy Adams](#), to replace the corrupt [Silas Deane](#)--who later turned out to be

a British spy--to negotiate a treaty of alliance. His ship escaped three British cruisers and a hurricane. Finding that [John Burgoyne's](#) defeat at Saratoga the previous September had already accomplished his purpose, Adams tried to bring some order into the American mission's finances and correspondence and sought to raise money in both France and Holland for the American cause with little success. He was both attracted to yet afraid of French manners and luxury: "The politeness, the elegance, the softness, the delicacy is extreme. In short, stern and haughty republican as I am, I cannot help loving these people." He was less kind to his senior colleague Franklin, whose high living and "continual dissipation" he considered harmful to the smooth running of the mission and dangerous to the American cause, as Franklin was too friendly with the French. Nevertheless, Adams viewed himself as superfluous once the treaty was signed and requested the mission be left in Franklin's hands.

Adams returned to Massachusetts in August 1779, just in time to write the new state constitution. Unlike other state constitutions being written at the time, which rendered the governor and upper house heavily dependent on a lower house elected by a wide franchise, Adams expressed his fear of both popular enthusiasm and aristocratic intrigue by opting for a traditional mixed "government of laws, and not of men," as his preamble declared. Representatives had to be worth £100, senators £300, the governor £1,000, and voters for the senate £60. The governor appointed the militia and had an absolute veto of the actions of the other two houses. Adams justified a powerful executive on the grounds that "we have so many men of wealth, of ambitious spirits, of intrigue, of luxury and corruption that incessant factions will disturb our peace without it. . . . The executive . . . ought to be the reservoir of wisdom as the legislature is of liberty." Adams's constitution also envisioned a strong, active government furthering the public good. He took special care to mention that Harvard College would retain its support and autonomy and that "it shall be the duty of legislators and magistrates, in all future periods of the commonwealth, to cherish the interests of literature and the sciences, and all seminaries of them."

Even before his constitution was in essence adopted in 1780, Adams was off to France again, this time to negotiate peace and a commercial treaty with England. He arrived in December 1779 with his sons John Quincy and Charles Adams. Since England refused to recognize his condition for negotiations, recognition of U.S. independence, Adams remained in Paris, writing innumerable letters to Congress on diplomatic and military matters, which were barely even acknowledged, and many more missives in both the French and English press in the hopes of influencing British public opinion to side with the United States. While in Paris, he evoked the ire of the French foreign minister, Comte Charles Gravier de Vergennes, when in June 1780 Adams refused to recommend to Congress that French, unlike American holders of the U.S. debt, be paid the original value of their investment instead of depreciated currency. Adams replied that, far from being a dependent client of France, the United States was an equal partner and had benefited France by their alliance: "the flourishing state of her maritime and commerce, and the decisive influence of her councils and negotiations in Europe, which all the world will allow to be owing in a great measure to the separation of America from her inveterate enemy, and to her new connections with the United States, show that the obligations are mutual." Adams soon specified one such obligation, complaining that "the state of things in America has become really alarming, and this merely for want of a few French men-of-war upon that coast." Franklin asked to have Adams removed, putting it bluntly to Congress that they could choose between Franklin's "decency and delicacy" and Adams's "stoutness, independence, and boldness." Congress

compromised by adding [John Jay](#), [Henry Laurens](#), Franklin himself, and Jefferson (who did not go to Europe) to its peace mission.

Unpopular in France, Adams headed for Holland, where after nearly two years of negotiations he obtained diplomatic recognition of the United States in addition to a much-needed loan. He returned to Paris for peace negotiations, which began in November 1782. With Jay he persuaded Franklin to ignore the congressional mandate that they "govern ourselves by her [France's] advice and opinions" and worked out with British envoy Richard Oswald a *fait accompli* that made the Mississippi River the western boundary of the United States despite the protests of France's Spanish ally. (Franklin, whose "decency and delicacy" was but one of his many masks, was delighted to go along.) Adams and his colleagues had already practiced the foreign policy that would serve the early republic so well. In Adams's words of 1780: "Let us, above all things, avoid, as much as possible, entangling ourselves with their wars or politics. Our business with them, and theirs with us, is commerce, not politics, much less war."

Adams approved in principle that American Loyalists should be compensated for property losses during the war, although the treaty clause that made reimbursement contingent on the action of individual states largely nullified it. He also compromised on the Canadian boundary and allowed that prerevolutionary debts to British merchants had to be collectible for commerce to continue. On one issue he stood fast. The "right" of New England to fish off the Grand Banks in the Atlantic Ocean he supported with massive erudition and documentation, refusing even the British willingness to write this "liberty" into the treaty: "Is there or can there be a clearer right? . . . If Heaven in the creation gave a right, it is ours at least as much as yours. If occupation, use, and possession give a right, we have it as clearly as you. If war and blood and treasure give a right, ours is as good as yours. . . . If then the right cannot be denied, why should it not be acknowledged?" This was the sort of relentless argumentation Adams used to crown the exhaustive and exhausting cases he was famous for. It also explains, as he himself well knew, why he was never as popular as conciliatory types like Franklin and Jefferson: "I have long since learned that a man may offend and still succeed." The treaty, embodying Adams's clauses on the fisheries, debts, Loyalists, and Canadian boundary, was approved on 30 November 1782 without French knowledge. Adams remained in Europe, "out of patience," in a "ridiculous state of torture," while the treaty was ratified and then signed in September 1783, and he was appointed minister to England in February 1785. Abigail Adams finally joined him after a five-year separation in the summer of 1784 at Auteuil, in the suburbs of Paris, where he lived.

Adams had lost his chance for a commercial treaty with England when the peace ministry of the earl of Shelburne was replaced by the mercantilist Tories headed by William Pitt the Younger in 1784. He could accomplish little for Americans who wanted British forts removed from New York and the old Northwest or who demanded compensation for their slaves when the states refused to compensate the Loyalists. His pay cut by 20 percent when he moved to England, Adams was unable to reciprocally entertain other ministers or British dignitaries. He and Abigail felt uncomfortable in a snobbish, aristocratic society. The most satisfying accomplishment of his years in England was the signing of a commercial treaty with Prussia in 1786.

When he heard of Shays's Rebellion (see [Daniel Shays](#)) in Massachusetts against the constitution he had written, Adams began writing the mammoth three-volume *Defence of the Constitutions of*

Government of the United States of America, against the Attack of M. Turgot . . . (1787), which Abigail described as "an investigation into the different forms of government, both ancient and modern . . . with the purpose of demonstrating the superiority of mixed forms over simple ones," such as the unicameral legislative democracy advocated by Baron Anne Robert Jacques Turgot.

Adams returned to the United States in 1788. He was very popular, because the first volume of the *Defence* appeared just in time to provide a theoretical justification for the newly written U.S. Constitution. Adams was chosen vice president under the new government. However, he received only 34 of 69 electoral votes, and Washington received all for president. The rest scattered because [Alexander Hamilton](#), fearing Adams would prove too independent, persuaded many of the electors to vote for other candidates in the hopes of denying him election. Adams only discovered this plot years later, when he and Hamilton had become inveterate enemies.

Although Adams wrote, "My country has in its wisdom contrived for me the most insignificant office that ever the invention of man contrived or his imagination conceived," he managed to play an important role in the first Washington administration. A firm believer that pomp, circumstance, and titles were necessary to ensure that the populace respected the government, his insistence on wearing a sword and wig to preside over the Senate led to the portly Adams being dubbed "His Rotundity." (He soon stopped appearing in this diplomatic garb.) Adams had more opportunities to break tie Senate votes than any vice president has yet had, twenty in all. His support was critical for allowing the president to remove appointees without the "advice and consent" of the Senate required to install them, and to authorize commercial retaliation against the British refusal to reopen the prerevolutionary trade with the West Indies to Americans.

Adams also wrote, in 1791, *Discourses on Davila*, which created a furor, much like Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) did in England, because Adams argued that a nation such as France required a monarchy and aristocracy for political stability. Only in 1793 and 1794, with the execution of King Louis XVI and the Reign of Terror, did public opinion in both countries catch up with these conservative thinkers. Adams also made the mistake of endorsing a president for life and a hereditary upper house for the United States. Most famous in *Davila*, however, was his denial of the equality beloved by republicans in America, France, and elsewhere. In one of his most eloquent passages, Adams insisted that there was a universal passion for inequality: "Not only the poorest mechanic, but the man who lives upon common charity . . . even those who have abandoned themselves to common infamy, as pirates, highwaymen, and common thieves, court a set of admirers, and plume themselves upon that superiority which they have, or fancy they have, over some others. . . . The *passion for distinction*" lay at the root of human behavior; government was required to channel it into a constructive course.

Adams was reelected vice president in 1792, receiving 77 of the 134 electoral votes. That 50 of the votes went to New York governor [George Clinton](#) indicated the Democratic Republican party was forming in opposition to the Federalist. In 1796 Adams was chosen president over Jefferson by 71 votes to 68. Not all of Adams's electors supported the Federalist candidate for vice president, [Charles Cotesworth Pinckney](#), so Jefferson became vice president. Once again, Hamilton schemed unsuccessfully to take votes away from Adams, to win the election for Pinckney.

Problems with France dominated the Adams administration. As soon as he took office in March 1797, he learned the Directory had dismissed the American ambassador and had begun to seize American ships trading with England and its allies in the war that raged in Europe and the West Indies in retaliation for the Jay Treaty of 1795, which signaled a rapprochement between Britain and the United States. Adams agreed with the cabinet that a special mission to France was required, but he added [Elbridge Gerry](#), a supporter of Jefferson, to join Pinckney and [John Marshall](#). When the envoys were not even admitted to see the Directory because they would not pay a bribe, the famous XYZ affair, they returned home. "I will never send another minister to France, without assurances that he will be received, respected, and honored, as the representative of a great, free, powerful, and independent nation," Adams told Congress.

Adams agreed with the "High Federalists" in his cabinet, who were partisans of Hamilton-- Secretary of State [Timothy Pickering](#), Secretary of War [James McHenry](#), and Secretary of the Treasury [Oliver Wolcott](#)--that defense measures were called for. He wholeheartedly supported a navy bill that led to the construction of the USS *Constitution* ("Old Ironsides") and other frigates, which more than held their own with French warships during the Quasi-War with France fought on the high seas from 1797 to 1800. He did not endorse their plans for closer relations with Britain or support the large army Congress authorized in May 1798. Congress also passed the Alien and Sedition Acts that July in response to vituperative criticism of the administration's anti-French policy from the Democratic Republicans. These laws extended the waiting period for U.S. citizenship from five to fourteen years (most recent immigrants were Jeffersonians) and permitted the president to deport "alien enemies." The Sedition Act authorized imprisonment and fines for critics of the administration, but Adams did not enforce it vigorously. Only twenty-five cases were prosecuted, and those convicted were either pardoned or released by the incoming Jefferson administration in 1801. In 1800 Adams pardoned [John Fries](#), who had been sentenced to death for treason for leading a 1799 tax revolt of the farmers of northeastern Pennsylvania.

Adams stunned the High Federalists, who were poised for war, by appointing the minister to Holland, [William Vans Murray](#), a special envoy to France to negotiate differences between the nations in February 1799. This caused Hamilton and his supporters in the cabinet--whom Adams finally fired or forced to resign--to openly oppose Adams, their rancor culminating in Hamilton's "Letter Concerning the Public Conduct and Character of John Adams" of 1800. Widespread popular hostility to the standing army and the Alien and Sedition Acts led to an overwhelming defeat for the Federalists in the election of 1800. Adams, however, had managed to distance himself from the Hamiltonians and obtained 65 electoral votes to 73 for Jefferson. Had [Aaron Burr](#), Jefferson's vice presidential candidate, not manipulated the votes in New York City, which elected the Democratic Republican legislature that cast New York's twelve votes for Jefferson, Adams would have been reelected. He left Washington a bitter and depressed man, not remaining for his successor's inauguration, after appointing as many Federalist judges as possible to stave off what he saw as the "abyss" opening before the nation. Ironically, his envoy Murray had signed a peace accord with France on the eve of the election, 30 October 1800. With the war in Europe winding down, the French did not need to seize American ships. Adams thus left his successor a prosperous nation at peace and probably saved the Union by not using the military machine Congress had provided him with to fight a full-scale war and repress dissent at home, to the disgust of the High Federalists.

For the last quarter-century of his life, Adams lived in retirement in Quincy. He wrote in support of Jefferson's embargo and vigorously opposed the Federalists who threatened disunion during the War of 1812. He also produced a notable correspondence. Beginning in 1807, he wrote a series of angry letters in response to [Mercy Otis Warren](#)'s criticisms of his conduct in her history of the American Revolution. She called Adams vain, ambitious, and "corrupted" by his stay in Europe to repudiate republicanism for monarchy and aristocracy. (She did not mention that he refused to endorse her offspring, who were not very well qualified, for federal jobs.) "Madam . . . corruption is a charge that I cannot and will not bear. I challenge the whole human race, and angels and devils too, to produce an instance of it from my cradle to this hour," typifies the tone of Adams's replies. In 1814 he wrote thirty-two letters in response to [John Taylor](#) of Caroline's *An Inquiry into the Principles and Policy of the Government of the United States* (1814), which specifically criticized Adams's *Defence of the Constitutions*. Adams's most notable correspondent late in life was Jefferson, to whom Rush, their mutual friend, reconciled him in 1812. Their recollections of the events of their lifetimes and the by now gentle disagreement over whether republican America could be trusted to evolve into a moral, happy society without the traditional restraints of mixed government (Jefferson thought so, Adams did not) continued to be exchanged with decreasing frequency as they aged.

Adams retained his vigor until his late eighties--he walked three miles a day as late as 1822--but then failed. He died in Quincy during the presidency of his son John Quincy Adams, and his last words were the enigmatic, "Thomas Jefferson survives." Adams believed himself unjustly neglected and criticized by his contemporaries, as he predicted he would be by posterity. "The history of our Revolution will be one continued lie from one end to the other. The essence of the whole will be that Dr. Franklin's electrical rod smote the earth and out sprang General Washington. That Franklin electrified him with his rod--and thence forward these two conducted all the policy, negotiation, legislatures and war. . . . If this letter should be preserved and read a hundred years hence, the reader will say, 'The envy of . . . JA could not bear to think of the truth.' "

Adams had his flaws. "He is vain, irritable, and a bad calculator of the motives which govern men," Jefferson wrote in 1783, but Jefferson also wrote, "this is all the ill which can possibly be said of him." Honest, incredibly hard-working, and willing to take unpopular stands regardless of the consequences, Adams decisively shaped the fate of American history by his actions in revolutionary Boston, at the Continental Congress, in Paris as a diplomat, and in Philadelphia as president. Historians ranking the presidents almost invariably place him just below [Abraham Lincoln](#), Washington, Jefferson, [Woodrow Wilson](#), [Theodore Roosevelt](#), and [Franklin Roosevelt](#) for his role in preserving the nation during a troubled time (Tim Blessing and Robert K. Murray, *Greatness in the White House*, 2d ed. [1993]). Yet he will never be a folk hero like Jefferson or Washington, as he knew well. Short, stout, blunt, and cantankerous, he told the American people truths about themselves they needed to know yet did not want to hear (Richard A. Ryerson, remark at Society of Historians of the Early American Republic Conference, July 1994). Perhaps as aristocracy and inequality become more pronounced in the United States, Adams's reputation will grow as his words of warning become increasingly relevant.

Bibliography

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