

They "thought for all of us": The Contradictory Intersections of John Adams and Thomas Jefferson

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John Adams and Thomas Jefferson are rightly situated among the top echelon of the pantheon of the American Founding Fathers. Physically they were as different as could be—Jefferson was tall and lanky; Adams was short and dumpy. Both were fascinated with books and attended college—Adams at Harvard; Jefferson at William and Mary. Both became lawyers and farmed—one on a small parcel of rocky New England soil; the other on a plantation sprawling down from the top of a little mountain in the Virginia piedmont. One was born into a culture and economy based upon slavery and would own slaves until the day he died; the other never owned a slave. Although neither served in the military, one dreamed of military glory, but advised against war with Algiers in the mid-1780s (because we could not defeat them), prepared for war and came to be known as the father of the American navy, and yet lost his chance of being reelected president when his great statesmanship kept the nation out of war in 1800. The other despised war, never had a desire to serve in combat, but advocated war with Algiers in the mid-1780s (largely because it was an easy enemy to defeat), and who, as one of his first acts as president, sent a small fleet to the Mediterranean to defeat a weak foe only to be mired in war for five years. On religion they differed as well. Adams was a traditional New England

Congregationalist who believed in a close relationship between church and state. In their old age he and his wife embraced Unitarianism. Jefferson, on the other hand, starting life as an Anglican, soon became a deist and advocated the complete separation of church and state, so much so that one of the three achievements he wanted inscribed on his tombstone was that he was the author of the Virginia Act for Religious Freedom. People regularly saw Adams, the great democrat, as a monarchist, and Jefferson, the patrician, as the great democrat. Adams, the loyal Federalist, became a man above even his own party, while Jefferson, the despiser of political parties, worked hard to found an opposition party over which he became the titular head.

In many ways, these two men had remarkable careers that mirrored each other. Nine years older than Jefferson, Adams was twenty years Jefferson's senior in political activity. Both were leaders in the movement for independence from Great Britain. Each served in their colonial assembly and in the Continental Congress. Both wrote declarations of independence—Adams the passionless legal brief that served as the congressional resolution of 15 May 1776, that recommended that the colonies write new constitutions amenable to the people instead of to the crown; while Jefferson was the primary draftsman of the formal Declaration of Independence whose poetry has inspired liberty-seeking people all over the world. Both men contributed to the writing of their state constitutions—Adams's still survives as the longest-lived written constitution still in operation. Both men were diplomats in Europe—Jefferson for five years; Adams for ten. Both men served as vice president of the United States—Adams for eight years

and Jefferson for four. Both served as president of the United States—Jefferson for two terms; Adams for one. Adams was briefly chief justice of his state; Jefferson served two one-year terms as governor of Virginia and four years as U.S. secretary of state. Both men died on the Fourth of July 1826, the fiftieth anniversary of the adoption of the Declaration of Independence. During their fifty-year acquaintance they were close personal and political friends for thirty years and opponents or estranged from each other for twenty years. Both men were avid readers and prolific writers. Their similar experiences and sometimes sharply differing opinions make their correspondence, especially their correspondence with each other, a national literary treasure.

Despite their contemporary stature and all of their many accomplishments, most, if not all, historians agree that it was fortuitous that they were out of the country serving diplomatic tours in England and France when the Constitutional Convention met in Philadelphia in 1787. The historical consensus is that they would have been disruptive elements who would have hampered the give and take of more pragmatic politicians—men such as James Madison, James Wilson and Alexander Hamilton—who, through a series of compromises, forged a magnificent constitution that divided power between an energized central government and the states, separated the three branches of the central government, and provided a means of self correction through a difficult but achievable process of amending the original compact. Paraphrasing Alexander Hamilton in introducing the first number of “The Federalist” essays, the Convention delegates gave the American people the opportunity to choose for

themselves the kind of government they would live under using reason and choice rather than blindly accepting the whims of chance or the heavy-hand of force.

Naturally it is impossible to determine whether Adams and Jefferson would have been divisive in the Philadelphia Convention. I, however, tend to feel just the opposite. I believe that they would have been valuable members of that assembly of “demigods,” and that the constitution proposed by the convention with them as delegates would have been an improvement, and that such a constitution would have been adopted by the American people with far less anguish and political divisiveness. In fact, that alternative constitution could have bound the country together in such a way that might have avoided the hellish civil war that the actual proposed Constitution almost inevitably mandated.

Counterfactual history is not a science. I’ll paint a broad, impressionistic landscape to illustrate my point, knowing full well that I won’t convert many. Perhaps, however, I will cause some to re-think their position about what role Adams and Jefferson might have played had they attended the federal Convention of 1787.

The first and perhaps most important perspective to keep in mind is that we must look at Adams and Jefferson as they were in 1787—not the disillusioned old men they became at the end of their political careers. They were instead at the height of their political powers, still filled with a youthful, euphoric optimism that their Revolutionary efforts would stimulate other peoples to jettison their monarchies and replace them with viable republican forms of government. Their generation had seceded from the most powerful empire in the world and had

written state and continental constitutions for themselves. As Adams had written in 1776, they had “been sent into life, at a time when the greatest lawgivers of antiquity would have wished to have lived.—How few of the human race have ever enjoyed an opportunity of making an election of government more than of air, soil, or climate, for themselves or their children.—When! Before the present epocha, had three millions of people full power and a fair opportunity to form and establish the wisest and happiest government that human wisdom can contrive?”¹ Their travels abroad demonstrated to themselves the importance of America as a role model. Second only to the maintenance of their own republic, they hoped to see Europe filled with republics based upon the same principles as their fledging republic.

Both Adams and Jefferson saw the need for a strengthened central government that would establish a new federal-state relationship. They were also aware of the danger of an over-reaction to America’s postwar problems. Jefferson concisely put it in quaint terms—“The hole & the patch should be commensurate.”²

Both men vehemently opposed monarchy and aristocracy. Serving in Paris, Jefferson wrote that “I am sensible that there are defects in our federal government: yet they are so much lighter than those of monarchies that I view them with much indulgence. I rely too on the good sense of the people for

¹ John Adams, “Thoughts on Government,” [March 1776], in Stephen L. Schechter, ed., *Roots of the Republic: American Founding Documents Interpreted* (Madison, Wis., 1990), 137.

² Thomas Jefferson to James Madison, Paris, June 20, 1787, John P. Kaminski, ed., *The Quotable Jefferson* (Princeton, N.J., 2006), 157.

remedy, whereas the evils of monarchical government are beyond remedy. If any of our countrymen wish for a king, give them Aesop's fable of the frogs who asked for a king; if this does not cure them, send them to Europe: they will go back good republicans."³ To George Washington, Jefferson wrote that "I was much an enemy to monarchy before I came to Europe. I am ten thousand times more so since I have seen what they are. There is scarcely an evil known in these countries which may not be traced to their king as its source, nor a good which is not derived from the small fibres of republicanism existing among them."⁴

John Adams also opposed monarchy.

It is the Form of Government, which gives the decisive Colour to the Manners of the People, more than any other Thing. Under a well regulated Commonwealth, the People must be wise virtuous and cannot be otherwise. Under a Monarchy they may be as vicious and foolish as they please, nay they cannot but be vicious and foolish. As Politicks therefore is the Science of human Happiness, and human Happiness is clearly best promoted by Virtue, what thorough Politician can hesitate, who has a new Government to build whether to prefer a Commonwealth or a Monarchy?⁵

³ Thomas Jefferson to David Ramsay, Paris, August 4, 1787, *ibid.*, 153.

⁴ Thomas Jefferson to George Washington, Paris, May 2, 1788, *ibid.*

⁵ John Adams to Mercy Otis Warren, Braintree, January 8, 1776, Robert J. Taylor et al., eds. *Papers of John Adams* (Cambridge, Mass., 1979)3:398.

Equally important, they saw the need for the creation of an energetic central government with separation of powers based not on the different classes of society but on the primary functions of government—legislative, executive, and judicial. Both men had strenuously favored a separation of powers—Jefferson in his draft of a state constitution for Virginia and Adams in his *Thoughts on Government* published in March 1776 and incorporated into the provisions of the Massachusetts constitution of 1780 as well as being explicitly stated in the Massachusetts Declaration of Rights which immediately preceded the text of the frame of government in the state constitution. Because neither man had been intimately involved in the drafting of the Articles of Confederation, neither had a vested interest in maintaining it, although Jefferson believed that the Articles, with “three or four new articles . . . added,” could have adequately served the country.⁶ This, in fact, was the opinion of the vast majority of Americans of the time—perhaps even as high as 95 percent of the population.

In 1787 Adams and Jefferson were at the peak of their political and personal friendship. Abigail Adams wrote to Jefferson that he was “the only person with whom my Companion could associate with perfect freedom and unreserved.”⁷ To her sister, Abigail wrote that in Jefferson her husband “has a firm and faithful Friend, with whom he can consult and advise, and as each of them have no object but the good of their Country in view, they have an unlimited confidence in each other, and they have only to lament

⁶ Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, Paris, November 13, 1787, Lester H. Cappon, ed., *The Adams-Jefferson Letters: The Complete Correspondence between Thomas Jefferson and Abigail and John Adams* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1959), 212.

⁷ Abigail Adams to Thomas Jefferson, London, June 6, 1785, in John P. Kaminski, ed., *The Founders on the Founders: Word Portraits from the American Revolutionary Era* (Charlottesville, 2008), 293.

that the [English] Channel divides their more frequent intercourse.”⁸ John Adams described his close personal and political relationship with Jefferson.

You can Scarcely have heard a Character too high of my Friend and Colleague Mr. Jefferson, either in point of Power or Virtues. My Fellow Laborer in Congress, eight or nine years ago, upon many arduous Trials, particularly in the draft of our Declaration of Independence and in the formation of our Code of Articles of War, and Laws for the Army. I have found him uniformly the same wise and prudent Man and Steady Patriot. I only fear that his unquenchable Thirst for knowledge may injure his Health.⁹

Jefferson’s relationship with Adams in Europe had caused him to re-evaluate his old friend’s personality, but he still appreciated Adams’s many virtues. Jefferson wrote to James Madison that

You know the opinion I formerly entertained of my friend Mr. Adams. Yourself & the governor [Edmund Randolph] were the first who shook that opinion. I afterwards saw proofs which convicted him of a degree of vanity, and of a blindness to it, of which no germ had appeared in Congress. A 7 months intimacy with him here and as many weeks in London have given me opportunities of studying him closely. He is vain, irritable and a bad calculator of the force and probable effect of the motives which govern men. This is all the ill which can possibly be said of

⁸ Abigail Adams to Mary Cranch, London, October 1, 1785, *ibid.*

⁹ John Adams to Henry Knox, December 15, 1785, *ibid.*

him. He is as disinterested as the being which made him: he is profound in his views: and accurate in his judgment except where knowledge of the world is necessary to form a judgment. He is so amiable, that I pronounce you will love him if ever you become acquainted with him. He would be, as he was, a great man in Congress.¹⁰

When Jefferson heard that Adams planned to return to America, he wrote his friend saying: “I learn with real pain the resolution you have taken of quitting Europe. Your presence on this side the Atlantic gave me a confidence that, if any difficulties should arise within my department, I should always have one to advise with, on whose counsels I could rely. I shall now feel bewidowed.”¹¹

Thus, I think that it is clear, that in 1787, when the Constitutional Convention convened, Adams and Jefferson would have been strong allies in cooperating for the good of their country.

The presence of John Adams and Thomas Jefferson in the Convention would have significantly added to the credibility of that body. Already the two great giants—George Washington and Benjamin Franklin—had been elected to the Convention. But these two great leaders were flawed. Franklin was old and frail (he was unable to stand to deliver his few speeches), while Washington was not an experienced legislator and virtually was speechless during the entire four months even though he did not preside when the Convention sat as a committee of the whole. Adams and Jefferson would not only have added luster to the Convention, but would have given the Convention great leadership. It

¹⁰ Thomas Jefferson to James Madison, Paris, January 30, 1787, *ibid.*, 38.

¹¹ Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, Paris, February 20, 1787, Cappon, 172.

was in parliamentary procedure and committee assignments that Adams and Jefferson excelled. Late in life, Jefferson described Adams in the Continental Congress as “our Colossus on the floor.”¹² And no one outworked or accomplished more than Jefferson in the Virginia House of Delegates in 1777 and 1778 and in the Confederation Congress in 1784. One man excelled on the floor; the other behind the scenes in committee. The American public would have been confident about what to expect from Adams and Jefferson—not only during the Convention but in the subsequent ratification debate in the states. It reminds me what general managers of National Football League teams say about the NFL draft. They want to draft the best athlete available regardless of the position they play. So it would have been with Adams and Jefferson. The country would have obtained the services of the two most able active political leaders of the times.

The next question to address is would these two men have been able to work together to obtain a viable form of government? Again, I think the answer is yes. Abigail Adams wrote of Jefferson that he had no sense of “self importance.” He had no “wish to force” his “sentiments and opinion upon Mankind.”¹³ She obviously felt the same way about her husband. Adams was in fact intent on serving his country. “Popularity,” he wrote, “was never my Mistress, nor was I ever, nor shall I ever be a popular Man.” Rather, Adams felt that “a Man must be sensible of the Errors of the People, & upon his guard against them, & must run the risk of their displeasure sometimes, or he will never do them any good in the long run.”¹⁴

¹² Conversation with Jefferson as recorded by Daniel Webster, Kaminski, *Quotable Jefferson*, 399.

¹³ Abigail Adams to Elizabeth Shaw, London, July 19, 1786, *ibid.*, 294.

¹⁴ John Adams to James Warren, London, January 9, 1787, Kaminski, *Founders on the Founders*, 38.

After working together closely in the Continental Congress and then serving together abroad, Adams and Jefferson would have been comfortable together. In fact, I believe that an Adams-Jefferson team would have functioned better than either one serving without the other in the Convention. A camaraderie had bound them together—they not only liked each other, they knew what to expect from each other—they trusted each other. They each felt the other wanted above all else the well being of their mutual country. Both men appreciated the scholarship of the other. Adams was just completing his first volume of the *Defence of the Constitutions of the United States* and Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* had been published only a few years earlier. They both would have appreciated and utilized Madison's scholarship in examining ancient and modern confederacies.

In addition to the separation of powers, both Adams and Jefferson would have advocated a bicameral legislature. Their Senate would have had no executive powers. A privy council appointed by the president would assist in making appointments and in treaty-making. Both men would have supported a larger house of representatives to adequately represent the interests of the people. Jefferson would have opposed the re-eligibility of the president to serve a second term. Adams would probably have agreed but would have favored a longer presidential term of office.

It is likely that a constitution created by Adams and Jefferson would have been more akin to a parliamentary system of government. Adams particularly admired the British constitution but without the corruption that it had accumulated over the centuries. The Articles of Confederation was moving toward a parliamentary system that significantly differed from its English predecessor in that the prime minister was not a

member of parliament, but was chosen by Congress. During his tenure, Superintendent of Finance Robert Morris assumed the defacto role of prime minister. When Morris resigned, Secretary for Foreign Affairs John Jay filled the vacuum and served as the country's prime minister until the new Constitution went into effect in 1789. Under the new constitution, a long term without prospect of re-election would have given the prime minister independence from the legislature. Knowing the importance of a strong prime minister in dealing with foreign affairs, Adams and Jefferson would have infused their chief executive with significant powers.

An independent judiciary would also have been created. Both Adams and Jefferson were at this time staunch advocates of an independent judiciary. With tenure for good behavior and a guaranteed salary, the judiciary, armed with a bill of rights, would have been the guardians of the rights of the people from oppressive acts of the executive or legislative branches of government.

A ceremonial head of state position would have been designed and possibly filled by George Washington, while a more active, experienced politician—someone such as John Adams—would have been selected as prime minister. Jefferson might have served as deputy prime minister, thus solidifying the coalition already built between Virginia and Massachusetts by the Lee-Adams Junta.

As delegates from large states, Adams and Jefferson would certainly have favored the Virginia Plan's proposal for a bicameral legislature with both houses based upon proportional representation. They, however, like their fellow delegates from Virginia, Massachusetts, and Pennsylvania, would have compromised with the small states and their demand that one house should have equal state representation.

Neither Adams nor Jefferson would have allowed the Convention to propose a constitution without a bill of rights. Jefferson had favored such a document for the Virginia constitution and Adams had written such a list of rights to precede the Massachusetts constitution of 1780. The bill of indictment against the king and others in the Declaration of Independence, in a certain sense, was an obverse bill of rights pointing out the American rights that the king, the different ministries, and Parliament had violated. These rights had been written down in over 200 founding documents since the Virginia charter of 1606. Adams and Jefferson were committed to a bill of rights. Jefferson wrote that “a bill of rights is what the people are entitled to against every government on earth, general or particular, & what no just government should refuse or rest on inferences.”¹⁵ With a bill of rights attached to the proposed Constitution there would have been far fewer opponents of the Constitution and the opposition would have been far less heated. Indeed, the lack of a bill of rights was the foremost reason for Ant federalist opposition.

With less opposition expected in the anticipated process of ratification, the Convention would not have felt obliged to offer concessions over slavery to the Deep South. In all likelihood the Convention would not have prohibited Congress from stopping the importation of slaves from Africa before 1808, instead of allowing that abhorrent traffic to continue for twenty more years. Without a twenty-year window for the importation of slaves, perhaps the institution of slavery would have met the same fate in the South as it was then experiencing in the North. Furthermore, a federal bill of rights predicated on the basis of the equality of all men, might have encouraged federal judges

¹⁵ Thomas Jefferson to James Madison, Paris, December 20, 1787, Kaminski, *Quotable Jefferson*, 116.

to follow the example of Massachusetts Chief Justice William Cushing, who in 1783 ruled that the Massachusetts Declaration of Rights provision that “all men are created equal,” prohibited slavery in Massachusetts. Perhaps some brave federal judges would have interpreted the federal bill of rights in that fashion.

Even though Adams and Jefferson were unable to attend the Philadelphia Convention, they in a certain way were indeed present during the debates. The Massachusetts constitution of 1780—written almost single-handedly by John Adams—was the single most important model that the Philadelphia delegates drew upon. Adams’s *Thoughts on Government* and his recently published *Defence of the Constitutions of the United States* also influenced the delegates. Jefferson’s *A Summary View of the Rights of British America* published in 1774, his draft of the Virginia state constitution of 1776, his re-codification of Virginia laws, his correspondence with James Madison, and most importantly the general principles embodied in the Declaration of Independence all informed the delegates in the Convention—not only the thirty-nine signers, but also those delegates who came and left early and those who in the end could not endorse the Constitution. Benjamin Rush correctly captured the feeling that most Americans had for John Adams and Thomas Jefferson. They were considered “the North and South Pole of the American Revolution. Some talked, some wrote, and some fought to promote and establish it.” But Adams and Jefferson, Rush said, “*thought* for us all.” Rush told Adams that “I never take a retrospect of the years 1775 and 1776 without associating your opinions and speeches and conversations with the great political, moral, and intellectual achievements of the Congresses of those memorable years.”¹⁶ Had Adams and Jefferson

¹⁶ Benjamin Rush to John Adams, Philadelphia, February 17, 1812, Kaminski, *Founders on the Founders*, 59.

been delegates to the Philadelphia Convention of 1787, they would have indelibly left their mark on the Constitution promulgated to the American people. It would have been a different Constitution to be sure, and it would have changed the course of American history.
