
Book Review

A Step Toward Reviving The American Intellectual Tradition

by Nancy Spannaus

John Adams

by David McCullough

New York: Simon & Shuster, 2001

751 pages, hardbound, \$25

“Popularity was never my mistress, nor was I ever, or shall I ever be a popular man. But one thing I know, a man must be sensible of the errors of the people, and upon his guard against them, and must run the risk of their displeasure sometimes, or he will never do them any good in the long run.”

So wrote John Adams, in a letter to his friend James Warren at the beginning of the momentous year 1787. Truthfully, biographer David McCullough remarks that this statement could serve as a synopsis of the future President’s course through public life. Today, in the face of the decline of the American character to a state where most citizens routinely get their opinions and convictions from the popular news media, not daring to think for themselves, such a self-reflection automatically puts Adams far above the crowd. When you add the fact that Adams’ own principles were shaped by the continuity of extraordinary republican thinking which characterized the Winthrop-Mather intellectual tradition in New England, you can get a beginning appreciation of the quality of this usually denigrated and ignored “Founding Father.”

This author is unfamiliar with McCullough’s other books, but this biography of John Adams is definitely worthwhile. It is explicitly based on McCullough’s understanding that the American Revolution was an unprecedented event, based on the fight of extraordinary people with *ideas*, for which they had pledged to risk their lives. The book is heavily based on primary sources as well. As such, the fact that the Establishment publishing house Simon & Shuster brought out this

book, represents a serious turn away from the dismal standard of American historical work in recent decades, which has stomped all over the Revolution, lyingly calling it the work of greedy rich men with no ideas in their heads.

What comes to mind is the promotion, in the early 1930s, of the American Founding Fathers, in particular Treasury Secretary Alexander Hamilton, just at the point that the American Republic was going to be driven to have to take up those ideas again, to get out of the Depression. *John Adams* has been on the bestseller list for more than 16 weeks, and promoted not only in the literary supplements, but also in “low-brow” papers such as *USA today* and the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*. Its popularity follows that of another serious book praising the Founding Fathers, called *Founding Brothers*.¹ Some faction of the Establishment wants to get Americans to stop trivializing their history, and begin to once again understand what the United States was founded to do.

Another point, however, must be stressed. The true history of the last 25 years would show that it is the political-philosophical movement around economist and statesman Lyndon LaRouche which has provided the motive force for reviving the American Intellectual Tradition, which John Adams shares with John Winthrop, Cotton Mather, Benjamin Franklin, Alexander Hamilton, Adams’ son John Quincy Adams, and others. LaRouche’s political campaigns and writings, in addition to a series of groundbreaking history books,² have unfolded the story of how the American Revolution was, in fact, the outgrowth of the breakthroughs mankind made in the Italian Renaissance. And, only if the leadership of the

1. See this author’s review of *Founding Brothers: The Revolutionary Generation*, by Joseph J. Ellis, in *Fidelio* magazine, Summer 2001.

2. There are four American history books produced by associates of LaRouche: *The Political Economy Of The American Revolution*, ed. by Nancy Spannaus and Christopher White (out of print); *The Civil War And The American System*, by W. Allen Salisbury; *Treason In America*, by Anton Chaitkin; and *How The Nation Was Won, America’s Untold Story*, by H. Graham Lowry (out of print).

United States takes up the American Intellectual Tradition as LaRouche uniquely embodies it, will this country, and the world, actually succeed in pulling this nation back from the brink—especially in this time of extraordinary crisis.

The Adams Story

That said, let us take up the contributions of John Adams, which McCullough describes, but have been buried under a load of lies, starting within his own lifetime.

First, it should be noted that Adams hails from the very best of the New England republican tradition. His key teacher was Prof. John Winthrop at Harvard, who was a devotee of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz,³ and his understanding of Classical humanist culture was of some depth. This background is inadequately noted by McCullough, but crucial to understanding what Adams was willing and able to do in this revolutionary period.

McCullough does, however, provide adequate evidence to show that the caricature of the New England “Puritan” is wildly misapplied to Adams—and many others. Once in France, at the start of his diplomatic career, Adams, and later his beloved wife Abigail, were avid devotees of the theater, concert halls, beautifully sculptured gardens, and fine dining and wines. (Not to mention John’s appreciation of elegantly dressed, intellectual French ladies!)

And, yes, John Adams was a serious intellectual, who thought through his ideas, fought them out with his peers, and was committed to a victory for the concept of republicanism in the long term—whether he and his family might benefit from it or not.

Adams’ Contributions

Now, let’s look at the absolutely indispensable contributions which John Adams made to the creation of our republic, and the winning of the Revolutionary War, most of which contributions McCullough describes, even though he does not put a spotlight on them.

- It was John Adams, as a member of the Massachusetts delegation to the Continental Congress, who took the initiative to nominate Virginian George Washington as Commander-in-Chief of the Continental Army, whose first assignment was to rush to the defense of Boston. Had this alliance between Massachusetts and Virginia not been consummated, the chances for holding the 13 colonies together would have been considerably diminished, if not negligible.

- In March 1776, it was John Adams who first laid out a positive set of conceptions for a new independent American government in a ten-page, widely circulated letter called “Thoughts on Government” (see below).

3. For a review of the Renaissance tradition among the New England founding fathers, including the Winthrop family, see Lowry’s *How The Nation Was Won*.



John Adams was nearly 89 when he posed for this portrait by Gilbert Stuart. While much maligned during his lifetime and since, President Adams is an example of the “American Intellectual Tradition” that must be restored today.

- It was John Adams who, on May 10, 1776, put forth, with Richard Henry Lee of Virginia, a Congressional resolution recommending that the individual colonies assume all powers of government, and that the authority of the British Crown be “totally suppressed.” This resolution, which Adams himself called “the most important resolution that was ever taken in America,” was the precursor to the event we later chose to celebrate, the passage of the Declaration of Independence on July 2, 1776.

Adams also played a very active role in the debate over the adoption of the Declaration, on whose drafting committee he served with Jefferson, Franklin, Sherman, and Livingston.

- After a two-year stint as part of the U.S. legation in France, John Adams came back in 1779 and wrote the Constitution for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, one of the strongest republican documents ever produced (see below).

- During his next tour of duty in France, which started in 1779, Adams took an aggressive, if undiplomatic, stand in order to get the French government to send a Navy to North America, in order to challenge the British fleet. Adams had the strategic sense to know that it would take a successful

challenge to British sea power to give the young republic a victory.

- Between 1780 and 1782, John Adams waged a single-handed campaign to win the support of the population and leadership of the Kingdom of Holland, in order to get a much-needed loan for the bankrupt United States. This effort was undertaken on his own initiative, after he had been rebuffed, actually dismissed, by Congress for his lack of tact with the French government, and represented an extraordinary achievement.

- In 1782-83, John Adams was part of the delegation which negotiated the Treaty of Paris with Great Britain, thus capping the American victory in the Revolutionary War.

- In 1787, while debates over the ratification of the U.S. Constitution were raging, John Adams, who was serving as the U.S.'s first ambassador to London, wrote a book entitled *A Defense Of The Constitution Of The Government Of The United States Of America*, which played a highly positive role in creating support for it.

- During his Presidency, 1796 to 1800, John Adams navigated the increasingly wild pressures from Federalists, Democratic-Republicans, the French, and the British, to follow George Washington's dictum to keep the infant United States out of war.

Although Adams lived for almost 26 years after he left the Presidency, long enough to see his son John Quincy elected to the highest office of the land, he did not play any central role in party or national politics during that period.

A True Revolutionary

While most people will undoubtedly be surprised to discover how crucial John Adams' activities were in assuring the success of the Revolution, the quality of his thinking about the principles of government provides a crucial additional dimension to both understanding his role, and understanding what must be revived today. His *Thoughts on Government*, the Massachusetts Constitution, and his later *Defense of the Constitution* are excellent sources.

Adams began his *Thoughts on Government* with the following statement of voluntarism:

"It has been the will of Heaven that we should be thrown into existence at a period when the greatest philosophers and law-givers of antiquity would have wished to live, . . . a period when a coincidence of circumstances without example has

afforded to thirteen colonies at once an opportunity of beginning government anew from the foundation and building as they choose. How few of the human race have ever had an opportunity of choosing a system of government for themselves and their children? How few have ever had anything more of choice in government than in climate?"

Adams described the purpose of government as the happiness of the people, adding that all "sober inquirers after truth" realize that happiness comes from virtue, and therefore the form of government with virtue as its foundation was the best opportunity to promote the general happiness. Such a government would be republican, and "an empire of laws and not of men." This also required, he said, that, while there should be a representative assembly as part of the government, domination by the popular legislature would make government, like an individual with unchecked power, subject to "fits of humor, transports of passion, partialities of prejudice." In other words, the whims of public opinion.

Thus, Adams put forward the contribution for which he is most famous—the idea of "checks and balances" through a separate council, or Senate, a strong executive, and an independent judiciary. But that was not all; he emphatically added the need for the promotion of education. "Laws for the liberal education of youth, especially for the lower classes of people, are so extremely wise and useful that to a humane and generous mind, no expense for this purpose would be thought extravagant."

A mere three years later, Adams had the opportunity to put these general thoughts into concrete form, when he was called upon to draft the Constitution of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts in 1779. Adams himself chose to call Massachusetts a "commonwealth," and proceeded to define the concept of such a form of government in the preamble:

"The end of the institution, maintenance, and administration of government is to secure the existence of the body politic; to protect it; and to furnish the individuals who compose it with the power of enjoying, in safety and tranquility, their natural rights and the blessings of life; and whenever these great objects are not obtained, the people have a right to alter the government, and to take measures necessary for their safety, happiness, and prosperity.

"The body-politic is formed by a voluntary association of individuals. It is a social compact, by which the whole people covenants with each citizen, and each citizen with the whole people, that all shall be governed by certain laws for the common good."

(Adams' concept is not to be confused with Locke's idea of the social contract, based on autonomous individuals each negotiating to protect their property rights. Adams, to the contrary, believes in the subsuming principle of the common good.)

Among the additional notable aspects of the Massachusetts Constitutional draft, which was adopted with very few

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changes, was a Declaration of Rights, and a section entitled "The Encouragement of Literature, Etc." This section, according to McCullough, was an innovation in constitutions, and a remarkable one at that, by declaring it the *duty* of government not only to provide education but to "cherish" the interests of literature and science, arts, commerce, trades, manufactures, and natural history. The paragraph, Section II of Chapter 6, read as follows:

"Wisdom and knowledge, as well as virtue, diffused generally among the body of the people being necessary for the preservation of their rights and liberties; and as these depend on spreading the opportunities and advantages of education in various parts of the country, and among the different orders of the people, it shall be the duty of legislators and magistrates in all future periods of this commonwealth to cherish the interests of literature and the sciences, and all seminaries of them, especially the university at Cambridge, public schools, and grammar schools in the towns; to encourage private societies and public institutions, rewards and immunities, for the promotion of agriculture, arts, sciences, commerce, trades, manufactures, and a natural history of the country; to countenance and inculcate the principles of humanity and general benevolence, public and private charity, industry and frugality, honesty and punctuality in their dealings, sincerity, good humor, and all social affections, and generous sentiments among the people."

The third major piece which Adams wrote about government, was his *A Defense Of The Constitution Of The United States Of America*, produced in 1787 for the purpose of promoting the ratification of that document. Adams was writing from London, where he and his family had suffered innumerable humiliations at the Court of St. James, which looked down its nose most haughtily at this "plain," outspoken New Englander. On the one hand, he was absolutely clear, in developing his balance of powers scheme, that hereditary positions were an abomination—either in a monarchy or an aristocracy. He also firmly rejected parliamentarianism, and insisted upon a strong executive. On the other hand, he presented the English form of government as the best that had been crafted up to that point—seemingly overlooking the evil *content* of that government, for the forms which it employed.

Contrary to most stories about Adams' behavior as Vice President under Washington, and President, he maintained his impassioned anti-monarchical position—although he insisted that great respect be shown for the institution, and person, of the Presidency.

Can The Tradition Be Revived?

The United States has only had a few Presidents who shared the best qualities of John Adams—an understanding of history and culture, an inquiring and philosophical mind, an independence of popular opinion, and a republican passion for furthering the public good. John Quincy Adams and Abra-

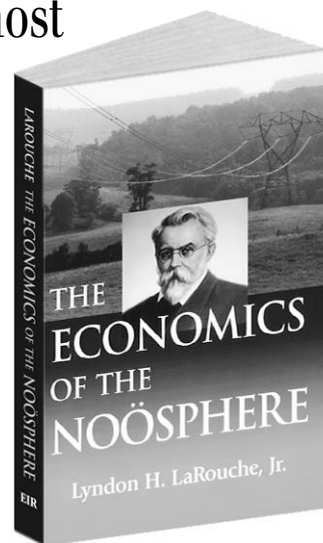
ham Lincoln stand out in the 19th Century, along with a few lesser lights. In the 20th Century, the only individual who approaches this level is Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who, fortunately, served three full terms.

Yet the ideas which inspired Adams, continue to be enshrined in our Constitution, our Declaration of Independence, and the history of our Republic, which itself lives in the minds and historical memories of our people. They lie dormant, waiting to be transformed into the inspirations for action, as the alien paradigm of British empiricism, and the rock-drug-sex counterculture show themselves to be the disasters which they are. These ideas await the emergence of a true leader who will fight public opinion, to revive the commitment to the general welfare and republicanism on which our nation was founded.

If this book on John Adams is understood, it will help this process. McCullough emphasizes, as have others, that it is Adams, the individualist and energetic fighter, who best represents the patriotic American—as opposed to the aristocratic, aloof "democrat," Thomas Jefferson. If we are rallied to save our nation, it will be by a leader more in the tradition of Adams, than Jefferson.

As we go into even more revolutionary times, the more involved in real American history people are, the better.

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successful
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