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The Unbending Pillars of John Adams's Political Philosophy

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The Unbending Pillars of John Adams's Political Philosophy

An Honors Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of History
Bates College

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Degree of Bachelor of Arts

by

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Lewiston, Maine
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Abstract

Though John Adams is rightly seen as one of the most active proponents of the American drive towards independence in the 1770s, he was also a staunch *opponent* of another revolutionary movement: the French Revolution of the 1790s. It has been difficult for scholars to reconcile the “radical” Adams of the 1760s with the apparently “conservative” and wary Adams of the 1790s. Historians have generally taken one of two approaches. Some argue that he underwent a deep and fundamental shift in political philosophy in the 1780s in reaction to a number of political developments in Europe and America. These trends, they argue, led to a wariness of popular control and an abandoned faith in the wisdom of the general will. Others contend that he did not change significantly during this period but maintained his previous positions, but they have tended to provide little support for this position with examples from Adams’s own writing. Reading a varied selection of Adams’s writings—some published, such as his well-known *Thoughts on Government*, others virtually unheard of, such as his extended marginalia in Mary Wollstonecraft’s 1794 book on the French Revolution—we see that Adams did not undergo a major shift in political thought. He held a consistent set of political beliefs, deeply rooted in the Puritan tradition, and which informed his reaction to many of the events in his lifetime, including the independence movement in America and the Revolution in France two decades later.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Within the larger literature on John Adams's place in America's founding revolution and early government lies another discussion, one clearly related to the larger story and just as interesting. The struggle undertaken by a number of scholars to understand Adams, often branded as the most ideologically distinctive and socially isolated "founding father," has grown out of his apparent "conservatism" compared with his American and European contemporaries. The label is based on a number of veins of his thought, but perhaps most salient is his opposition to the revolution in France.

Scholars have grappled with reconciling Adams, the face and driving force of the American independence movement, with the Adams of just fifteen years later, the ardent critic of the revolutionary events in France. How could the man referred to as the "Atlas of Independence" later become the allegedly monarchist opponent of liberty in France? There are two possible explanations. The first, an argument made by a number of prominent historians who wrote in the 1960s and 1970s, is that Adams underwent a major transformation between the years leading up to and including the American Revolution and the appearance of his lengthy treatise, *Defence of the Constitutions of America*, in 1787-1788.¹ In that work, Adams opposed the new forms of government advocated by the partisans of the French revolution, including a number of prominent *philosophes*. That work was and is often cited as evidence of Adams's monarchical and aristocratic political position and certainly as the clearest evidence for an extreme departure from his

¹ *A Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States of America*, 1787-88. Reprinted in *The Works of John Adams*, ed. Charles Francis Adams, vols. IV-VI, Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1856.

earlier ideas on republicanism through democracy.² The same authors who argue for this conservative shift assert that Adams was, at an earlier point, far less wary of popular control and more hopeful for the prospects of the formation of a republican, election-based government in America. Though their explanations of this apparent shift in ideology vary as to the causes and extent of the change, this school of thought maintains that the Adams of the American Revolution was lost sometime in the 1780s.

Interestingly, those who argue for a change in Adams's thought are generally less sympathetic to Adams as a political thinker and the political beliefs he espoused openly later in life. They wrote in a socially and politically more liberal era in American history. Gordon S. Wood, one such historian, later observed that his own works were sometimes used by other scholars for political agendas of the 1970s. He has written that his 1969 *Creation of the American Republic: 1776-1787*,³ like other works of his generation written in the same analytical vein, was "picked up and cited by an increasing number of scholars who had all sorts of interpretive needs and political agendas to promote,"⁴ used by neo-Progressive and neo-Marxist historians, lawyers, and others attempting to use the revolutionary era and the ideas of the Founding Fathers to complement the liberalism of the 1970s. The argument for consistency in Adams's thought, on the other hand, tends to come from a more recent generation of scholars, writing in a time more sympathetic to conservatism and therefore perhaps less inclined to "condemn" Adams for a purported conservative shift. Those who argue that Adams underwent a change in thought often look to his written work of the 1760s and 1770s as evidence of a budding republican who

² Richard Alan Ryerson, "Like a Hare before the Hunters': John Adams and the Idea of Republican Monarchy," *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society* 107 (1995): 16-29.

³ Gordon S. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic* (The University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

⁴ *Ibid.*, vi.

saw hope for his countrymen to create a better and more enlightened society than those which existed in Europe.⁵ They cite his later works, on the other hand, such as *Defence of the Constitutions* and *Discourses on Davila*,⁶ as evidence of a very limited and conservative kind of republicanism. And they invoke his opposition to the revolution in France and to the French *philosophes* as support for their theory of ideological change.

Wood is often mentioned as one of the original and most influential contributors to the “republican synthesis” of the 1960s and 70s, the literature on the role of political ideas in the American movement for independence. In his scholarship on John Adams, he was also a leading proponent of the idea of change in Adams’s thought. His *Creation* is regarded as perhaps the most important contribution to the republican synthesis. If we accept the observation that many in that more liberal era viewed Adams with a critical eye, it comes as no surprise that Wood devoted a chapter in *Creation of the American Republic* to the changing political outlook of John Adams entitled “The Relevance and Irrelevance of John Adams.”⁷

Like others who adopted the “change theory,” Wood correctly contends that Adams was at the forefront of the drive for independence during his time as a member of the Continental Congress in 1774-1775 and invokes Adams's earlier works as evidence of a man who had a republican, and radical, outlook on government: “In his *Thoughts on Government* Adams, like most Whigs in 1776, had assumed that politics was essentially a struggle between the ruler, or chief magistrate, and the people, in which the aristocracy sitting in an upper house would act as a mediator.”⁸ This analysis of Adams at the start of

⁵ John R. Howe, Jr., *The Changing Political Thought of John Adams* (Princeton University Press, 1966).

⁶ *Discourses on Davila*, 1790, reprinted in *Works*, vol. VI.

⁷ Wood, *Creation*.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 189.

the American Revolution is a classic one for those who believe Adams underwent a major change in the 1780s. So too is Wood's argument for a changed Adams, in which he cites *Defence* as the marker of a newly conservative, vastly different political outlook. He contrasts the ideas in *Thoughts*, explaining that in *Defence* Adams "described the basic struggle as one between the people and the aristocracy in which the magistracy or executive took on the function of balancer"⁹ between the threat from "the People," a potentially anarchic mob, and the "aristocracy," an overly ambitious class. In this analysis of Adams's later work, Wood has struck on a particularly important aspect of Adams's political philosophy. What he misses, though, is that this specific aspect of Adams's belief in balanced government had been a life-long emphasis. It was Adams's *rhetoric* which changed between his time in the Continental Congress, as a young thinker pushing for independence, and the time of his publication of *Defence* and the French Revolution, because of the changing political context. Given Adams's dark and very stable views on human nature—discussed in the next chapter--it seems unlikely that there was a major shift in his political outlook. For all the excellent analysis in Wood's treatment of Adams as a political thinker, he cannot be equally praised for his assessment of Adams's progression of thought; the "change" is not only overemphasized but, I believe, incorrect, and in any case an analysis of *why* Adams underwent this alleged change is largely lacking.

Unlike Wood's, John R. Howe's reading of Adams's political thought includes an extensive discussion of the reasons for the supposed shift.¹⁰ Howe argues that a number of American political developments caused a change in Adams's view of human nature

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Howe, *Changing*, 171.

and, therefore, his political ideology. Interestingly, in a review of Howe's work, *The Changing Political Thought of John Adams*, Wood praises the author for completing "the best historical study that has been done on the political thought of John Adams," adding "too often scholars have failed to relate Adams's political ideas to his political and personal experience and to his underlying moral and social assumptions. The result has been too many static, institutional, and unhistorical studies of Adams's thought."¹¹

Howe devotes the entirety of his concise and impressive work to the thesis of change in Adams's thoughts on human nature, his countrymen, and ideal political institutions. In essence, Howe's argument mirrors Wood's in its contention that the post-revolutionary years were a defining time for Adams as a thinker and politician, resulting in a very different outlook from that which he held prior to and during the revolution in America. By 1787, Howe argues, when Adams published his third volume of *Defence*, he had lost many of the republican principles from earlier in his political career, in which he was much more favorably inclined toward democracy. In other words, this change was not simply an accusation thrown at Adams by his political adversaries in an attempt to tarnish his reputation as an enlightened thinker. Howe boldly asserts that the reasons for Adams's conservative shift from the time he wrote *Thoughts on Government* to his publication of the third volume of *Defence* can be boiled down to two influential events: the threat to law and property in Massachusetts by mid-1787, especially during Shays's Rebellion, and the French Revolution in 1789. Both events, but perhaps more those close to home, had the effect of shifting Adams's dominant wariness from aristocracy—the few—to the commoners—the many. Most important is Howe's intricate discussion of

¹¹ Gordon S. Wood, review of *The Changing Political Thought of John Adams*, *New England Quarterly* 40 (1967), 119.

Adams's eventual development of a fear of elections and the corruptibility of the people. Howe argues that it was only later in life, based upon these changed preoccupations, that Adams began to privately contemplate the benefits of hereditary political offices and monarchy. Thus, a debate was begun over what contributed to an apparent shift in Adams's views on government, and the nature of the shift.

Though Joyce Appleby is well regarded for her historical analysis of the revolutionary era as a whole, she has also contributed to scholarship on John Adams in particular.¹² Like Howe, Appleby asserts that Adams was dramatically affected by events and experiences in the 1780s and was profoundly different after these years in his political thought and philosophy. The change she sees mirrors to a certain extent that described by Howe. Appleby argues that in 1775 Adams had prescribed a much more egalitarian, "republican" government for America, and, like the other "change" scholars, she contends that Adams changed his views on the proper balance of power between the executive and legislature in America by the 1790s. For her argument, she cites *Defence*. Appleby's argument differs from Howe's in that she emphasizes two factors having to do with his extensive stay in Europe as the primary contributions to the change. One was simply Adams's lengthy time spent abroad, beginning in November 1779, which she claims redirected "Adams's attention away from the problems of institutionalizing self-government toward the European social theories which acquired credibility with the successful American Revolution,"¹³ and in particular his relationship with radical French

¹² Joyce Appleby, "The New Republican Synthesis and the Changing Political Ideas of John Adams," *American Quarterly* 25 (1973), 578-595.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 581.

reformers.¹⁴ Secondly, Appleby contends that Adams was highly influenced by a work of De Lolme, *The Constitution of England*,¹⁵ which Adams is said to have copied long passages from into the margins of many of his own books, around the time he began writing the first volume of *Defence*, and which he first encountered while abroad.¹⁶ De Lolme's book was a treatise on the British system as the acme of balanced government.

There are two aspects of Wood, Appleby, and Howe's analyses of Adams's political thought that warrant attention reconsideration. First is their shared assertion that Adams became extremely wary of popular control only after the 1780s—as a result of his time in Europe and his reading of De Lolme, argues Appleby, and because of specific events in America *and* the coming of the French Revolution, argues Howe. The latter is of the utmost importance; it implies that part of Adams's reaction to the French Revolution was to drastically change his political theory and philosophy on man.

[Adams] stood in fear of what the French Revolution might bring, not only for France but for America as well...Evidence of Republican perfidy was abundant: the welcome of Genêt, opposition to the Jay Treaty in 1795, efforts to involve the U.S. openly on France's side in the European war, appeals for the sequestration of British-held debts, and the prohibition of all commercial intercourse with her.¹⁷

Essentially, what Howe and Appleby argue is that Adams was so greatly affected by European and American events of the 1780s and 90s that he developed a strikingly different view of human nature and of politics than he held in earlier years. I believe this

¹⁴ Ibid. She mentions “the two Dukes de La Rochefoucauld, the Duchess d’Enville, Mme. D’Houdetot, the Abbes, Mably and Morellet, the great Turgot and his young disciples, Pierre-Samuel Dupont and the Marquis de Condorcet.”

¹⁵ Jean Louis De Lolme, *The Constitution of England*, 1771.

¹⁶ Ibid., 586. Appleby explains, “The influence of De Lolme’s *Constitution of England* can be traced to the year and a half before Adams began writing the *Defence*. Although Adams’s own copy of the book has never been found, his papers contain 24 closely copied verbatim notes from the 1784 edition of De Lolme’s study.”

¹⁷ Howe, *Changing*, 197.

is not correct. Equally questionable is Appleby's contention that it was only after Adams's exposure to De Lolme's work that he began to entertain the idea of a strong "monarchical" or executive power as necessary at the head of any government, including America's. I believe she also misuses Adams's Puritan religious roots to aid her argument for a *change* in his political philosophy. She invokes Adams's "Calvinist ethics," rooted in the Massachusetts Bay Colony:

Both men [Adams and De Lolme] represented a kind of secularized Calvinism in which the basic and unchangeable corruption of man's nature determined the possible and the probable in politics. The *ever present* foe to order and justice was man himself. The French intended to liberate man, and such a specter prompted Adams to make a critical retreat from his earlier position.¹⁸

Appleby is correct in maintaining that Adams's religious upbringing, with its pessimistic view of human nature, was an influence on his political thought, and I will develop this argument in the next chapter.¹⁹ However, from a logical point of view, it cannot be argued that attitudes developed early in Adams's life can be used to explain political positions held only *later* in life rather than early (or *throughout* life). She strategically cites relevant passages from *Defence* rather than looking for evidence of this influence in his earlier works as well.²⁰

¹⁸ Appleby, "New Republic Synthesis," 587.

¹⁹ For an opposing view, see C. Bradley Thompson, "Young John Adams and the New Philosophic Rationalism," *William and Mary Quarterly* 55 (1998): 259-80. Thompson challenges the view that Adams's worldview was essentially a Puritan one, albeit with modifications. He says that from an early age in the diaries, one can see Adams adopting a questioning, rationalist view of the world. What Thompson does not stress enough, though, is Adams's lasting belief, throughout his life, in the important role of religion in insuring decent behavior, especially in wartime, as we shall see.

²⁰ Appleby, *ibid.* "What Adams was at pains to insist upon in the *Defence* was that social and political equality is an impossible goal. 'God Almighty has decreed in the creation of human nature an eternal aristocracy among men. The world is, always has been, and ever will be governed by it. All that policy and legislation can do is check its force,' he wrote in the margin of one of his books, and the sentiment is echoed in *Defence*."

What both Appleby and Howe choose to underplay would, I believe, weaken their argument that Adams underwent a deep change in his view of human nature and in his political theory as a result of events of the 1780s and 1790s.

In his review of Howe's work, Wood himself suggests that Howe overstates his argument for a shift from fear of the few to fear of the many. Instead, Wood asserts, the more profound shift was "the new role given to the executive in the balanced constitution."²¹ Though Wood is right to try to clarify exactly what (if anything) changed in Adams from his early adulthood to his condemnation of the French Revolution, still, there were convictions—fundamental and early ones—to which Adams remained strongly committed, making a radical shift in the 1780s improbable. His view of human nature, his ideal government, and his commitment to the absolute necessity of a strong executive (even monarchical) branch, are interrelated and, as we will see, can be best understood as a whole by identifying continuities in his writing from its earliest dates.²² To make the case for consistency of thought, I will turn to a number of works across many years. Some, especially Adams's published works, have been scrutinized relentlessly since their appearance. His private writings have been less exploited, and one has remained almost untapped. The importance of this variety is clear: to most accurately understand Adams as a thinker, we can't rely exclusively on published or unpublished writings; their content must be compared.

²¹ Wood, review of Howe, 121.

²² Though it is now less common in Adams scholarship to focus on alleged changes in thought after the Revolution, few authors have made a general case for consistency in his views on human nature, basic constitutional form, and monarchy from early in his adult life through the 1790s. Likewise, few have related this argument to their interpretation of Adams as he reacted to the revolution in France in the late 1780s and 1790s. For the most comprehensive argument for Adams's belief in a strong executive, see Ryerson, *op. cit.* Others who argue for consistency in Adams's political theory and vision of human nature include John Patrick Diggins (*John Adams*, Times Books, 2003) and C. Bradley Thompson (*John Adams and the Spirit of Liberty*, University Press of Kansas, 2002).

Most of the writings of John Adams that I will be referring to were compiled into a 10-volume series by his grandson, Charles Francis Adams, as *The Works of John Adams*.²³ I also draw on his letters, his diary, and his autobiography. His autobiography was written after his retirement from the presidency in 1801. It was published as three different works, one covering the period up until 1776, one for 1777-1778, and one for 1779-1780. Obviously, they are not a complete memoir of his life (he died in 1826), and they must be used with caution, because not all of his recollections agree with historical records or with his diary entries.²⁴ Likewise, his account of his early life was written retrospectively, at an age change theorists cite as his more conservative. *The Works* contains some of the diary entries and only parts of the autobiography.²⁵ The earliest diary entries are from 1753, when Adams was eighteen years old, and the entries went through 1796, the year in which he first encountered Mary Wollstonecraft's work on the French Revolution.

I will draw on publications from the 1760s, 70s, 80s, and 90s, that is, through the decades scholars have cited as a period of change, to ascertain the consistencies in Adams's thought, in order to better understand his reaction to the French Revolution.

A Dissertation on the Canon and Feudal Law (in *Works* III) was written in 1765, in response to the Stamp Act of that year. It begins with a discussion of the origin of oppression, which Adams sees as "the love of power." This is followed by a history of religious (i.e., Catholic) law and of law of feudal relationships in the Middle Ages, which

²³ Charles Francis Adams, *The Works of John Adams* (Boston, Little, Brown, and Co., 1850-56). This collection is available as printed volumes, of course, and also on the Web at http://oll.libertyfund.org/?option=com_staticxt&staticfile=show.php%3Ftitle=2098. This web site contains the Adams books as both searchable text and as PDF facsimiles of the original books.

²⁴ Bernard Bailyn, "Butterfield's Adams: Notes for a Sketch," *William and Mary Quarterly* 19 (1962): 238-56, p. 242.

²⁵ A better source for this material is the Web site of the Massachusetts Historical Society, <http://www.masshist.org/publications/apde/browseV.php>.

Adams describes as tools of oppression of the masses by elites. Only the Protestant Reformation, he argues, freed the people from the joint injustices of both.

The *Novanglus* letters (*Works IV*) were a series of essays submitted to the Boston Gazette between January and April of 1775. In them Adams provides a rationale for resistance to British oppression and a refutation of the claim that the British Parliament had authority over the colonies.

Thoughts on Government (*Works IV*) was a 1776 pamphlet written as a response to requests from legislators in various colonial states for guidance on constructing a government. It was also a critique of Tom Paine's *Common Sense* and his call for a unicameral government. It was the most influential publication in which Adams described the "balanced" government he would advocate for the rest of his life.

A Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States of America, like *Discourses on Davila*, which appeared later, used a vast array of historical cases to argue for the proper (i.e., balanced) form of government. The first volume (*Works IV*) appeared in 1787 and the other two (*Works V-VI*) the next year. The first volume was a response to a letter by the French economist and politician Turgot that criticized some of the American constitutions as being imitations of the English constitution. Turgot's letter was written in 1778 but published posthumously as part of Richard Price's *Observations on the Importance of the American Revolution* in 1784. His "unnamed target" was Adams's *Thoughts on Government*.²⁶ In *Defence*, Adams examined ancient, medieval, and modern governments, as well as political theories from ancient times to his own time. It was an extended version of the argument he had made in *Thoughts*, but with an explicit

²⁶ C. Bradley Thompson, "John Adams and the Coming of the French Revolution," *Journal of the Early Republic* 16 (1996): 361-87, p. 364.

defense of the importance of the "aristocratic" (senate) and monarchic (presidential) sectors of government, arguing that hierarchies were inevitable in society and must be carefully controlled by the proper type of government. Adams discusses the excesses of the French Revolution, which he claimed were an example of the inevitable end result of a purely democratic government. He also argued that purely aristocratic or monarchical governments had always failed, as well as governments that contained only two of the three necessary components. This work was widely attacked as advocating for monarchy, and indeed, it may do so implicitly, although Adams always denied favoring the institution.

Discourses on Davila (Works VI) appeared in installments in 1790-91 in the *Gazette of the United States*, a Federalist newspaper in Philadelphia, until opposition to his essays, for the same reasons his *Defence* was criticized, became so strong that Adams stopped. They were published anonymously, but Adams was generally known as the author. This work, which Adams himself called a "dull, heavy volume" in a marginal note in his copy of the 1805 book version, consists of commentary on the 1630 book of the Italian historian Enrico Caterino Davila on the French civil wars of the sixteenth century. Adams wrote this work, as with *Defence*, to address the recent events in France, but the immediate motivation may have been to defend balanced government against criticisms by Condorcet in *Lettres d'un Bourgeois de New-Heaven*.²⁷

In order to reach the ultimate goal of understanding Adams's reaction to the French Revolution, I will use a major primary source by an author other than Adams: *An Historical and Moral View of the French Revolution; and the Effect it Has Produced in Europe*, by Mary Wollstonecraft, who is known by many simply as a pioneer in

²⁷ Ibid.

feminism.²⁸ This work, though, is a thorough history of every major event of the lead-up to and first year of the Revolution, intertwined with a critical analysis of the events and of the French national character. The book provides a detailed outline of Wollstonecraft's understanding of human nature and of the political philosophy she believes follows from that nature.

Wollstonecraft concludes her analysis after the first year of the Revolution, and does not discuss what would come to be known as “the Terror,” including the bloodier days of September 1792. She does, though, describe the violence on a general level, and often. From the outset of her 522-pages, Wollstonecraft acknowledges, in her characteristically dramatic prose, the consequences of a revolution carried out by a people that had only just been “liberated” from the intellectual constraints and abuses of France’s absolute monarchy and dominant aristocratic class.

The rationale for including this work can be found in the margins of one particular copy of it—the one owned by John Adams. Adams read this book at least twice--once in 1796, shortly after its publication, and again in 1812--and it is marked with over 10,000 words²⁹ throughout the book’s margins—a physical embodiment of his ardent disagreement with her beliefs about human nature and about the potential of the French Revolution. These marginal comments stand as a vivid expression of the political philosophy Adams had held throughout his life. Despite the existence of this remarkable artifact, in which a giant of political philosophy took great pains to analyze nearly every detail of the work of a woman whose views would only be appreciated posthumously,

²⁸ Mary Wollstonecraft, *An Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution and the Effect it Has Produced in Europe* (London: J. Johnson, 1795).

²⁹ Daniel I. O'Neill, "Correction: John Adams versus Mary Wollstonecraft on the French Revolution and Democracy," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 68 (2007): 722-23.

very little has been said about the Adams-Wollstonecraft “debate.”^{30,31} In his notes, we see Adams’s most fiery reactions when Wollstonecraft addresses the role of human nature in the revolution’s course, and, intimately connected, France’s new governmental structure. Within his commentary, dated to 1796 and 1812—both post-change, Wood, Howe, and Appleby would note—we find the same contentions and basic principles Adams had espoused since the 1750s, before the War for Independence, during his religious youth, when he began to first consider the question of man’s nature and how it relates to political theory and governmental forms. If we understand the close similarities between Adams’s views on human nature and government during the 1780s and 1790s, as he was reacting to the French Revolution, and his ideas from much earlier in his life, we understand that Adams was a man influenced by everyday events, as we all are, but with a dogmatic and basically unchanging opinion on matters he held to be of the utmost importance.

³⁰ Zoltan Haraszti, *John Adams & The Prophets of Progress* (Harvard University Press, 1952); Daniel I. O’Neill, “John Adams versus Mary Wollstonecraft on the French Revolution and Democracy,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 68 (2007): 451-76.

³¹ A PDF facsimile of Adams’s copy of Wollstonecraft can be found at <http://www.archive.org/details/historicalmoralv00woll> and a transcription of the marginalia at http://www.librarything.com/wiki/index.php/An_Historical_and_Moral_View_of_the_Origin_and_Progress_of_the_French_Revolution.

Chapter 2: Human Nature

John Adams's lifelong philosophy of government, which, I believe, varied little from his earliest thoughts on politics to his writing on the French Revolution in the 1790s, was based on his strongly held views of human nature. And his understanding of human nature was, in turn, informed by the religious milieu in which he was raised. This interpretation of Adams's philosophy has been offered by several scholars who have studied Adams's political thought for the purpose of identifying constants and changes.³² Few, though, have emphasized the closeness of the specific governmental form he espoused to his beliefs about human nature.

Both Howe and Appleby, despite their assertion that Adams underwent fundamental changes during his time abroad in the 1780s and as a reaction to events in France and America, acknowledge the importance of Adams's religious upbringing and beliefs about the human character. "No area of human knowledge, with the possible exception of physics, received more attention among eighteenth-century men than moral philosophy," observed Howe, adding that Adams knew "the effort to understand society, to speculate about constitutions and systems of government must begin from a clear understanding of human nature."³³ In a 1759 letter, Adams conveyed concisely a belief that would inform all of his later work:

'Tis impossible to judge with much precision, of the true motives and qualities of human actions or of the propriety of rules contrived to govern

³² For the most convincing and frequently cited arguments for the profound effect of Puritan society and Calvinism on John Adams, see Bernard Bailyn, "Adams: Notes for a Sketch," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 19 (1962): 238-56 and Edmund S. Morgan, "John Adams and the Puritan Tradition," *New England Quarterly* 34 (1961): 518-29.

³³ John R. Howe, Jr., *The Changing Political Thought of John Adams* (Princeton University Press, 1966), 15.

them, without considering with like attention all the passions, appetites, affections, in nature, from which they flow. An intimate knowledge, therefore, of the intellectual and moral world is the sole foundation on which a stable structure of knowledge can be erected. And the structure of British laws is composed of such a vast and various collection of materials, taken partly from Saxony, Normandy, and Denmark, partly from Greece and Rome, and partly from the Canon and Feudal law, that 'tis impossible for any builder to comprehend the whole vast design...without acquainting himself with Saxon, Danish, Norman, as well as Greek and Roman history, with Civil, Feudal, and Canon law.³⁴

And so we see a young Adams nearly two decades before the War for Independence (the years in which he wrote *Thoughts on Government*, cited by many as his most hopeful, republican, egalitarian text, explaining the impossibility of understanding constitutional forms without understanding “the passions, appetites, and affections” of men, and those societies influential to Britain’s constitutional form—that which Adams found most effective in controlling men’s dangerous tendencies. In his autobiography, Adams would write of the years 1768-1770,

I had read enough in History to be well aware of the Errors to which the public opinions of the People, were liable in times of great heat and danger... when artfully excited to Passion, and even when justly provoked by Oppression.... I had learned enough to shew me, in all their dismal Colours, the deceptions to which the People in their passion, are liable, and the totall Suppression of Equity and humanity in the human Breast when thoroughly heated and hardened by Party Spirit.³⁵

Though his autobiography is not the most reliable source for ascertaining his thought at a given moment in his life, Adams makes a point of conveying to his reader that from a young age he had studied the nature of man, case by case, from society to society, and that he was wary of our innate sinfulness. Scholars arguing for a change cite the 1760s

³⁴October 1759 letter to Jonathan Sewall.

<http://www.masshist.org/publications/apde/portia.php?mode=p&id=DJA01p123#DJA01p123>

³⁵Autobiography (*Works* II: 214).

and 1770s as the decade in which Adams was most optimistic about human potential and the possibilities of republicanism. Yet his autobiographical account of his thinking in this period does not exactly support this account. Even in the years leading up to the War for Independence, when he was indeed deeply involved in the fight against the encroaching hand of British Parliament, he had developed a firm belief in the controls needed to curb the passions of “the People.” However, if we are to make the case for a genuinely unchanged view of human nature, more proof is needed than a retrospective account from later in life, written during what change theorists assert as Adams’s more conservative and less republican period.

If we accept that Adams believed deeply in the importance of studying both history and the human heart in order to create the best possible forms of government, it makes good sense that some scholars have turned to Adams’s own formative influences, especially his religious upbringing and the religious history of New England. First and foremost, one must understand his relationship with certain aspects of Puritanism that resulted from reflecting on his *own* nature, and especially his vices. So important were these early experiences and observations that we could argue that Adams developed the principles by which he would eventually condemn much of France’s revolution as a young man struggling to fully understand his own desires.

To understand these principles, I examine both the society in which Adams was raised and its historical roots—those of the Massachusetts Bay Colony and its Puritan founders. As David McCullough rightly notes, “We can’t understand the people of that distant time without understanding the culture. You have to read what they read, not just

what they wrote.”³⁶ What we see, in short, is that the unique history of Massachusetts and its people had a profound influence on Adams and served as a stimulus to his study of human nature and government.

New England’s founding by Europeans, like that of many of its neighboring lands to the north and south, began as a chartered mission through royal grant, in this case by King Charles of England, in 1629.³⁷ The King’s charter specifies (by name) the appointed governor, deputy governor, and eighteen assistants to the governor but proclaims that thereafter all positions would be chosen by the freemen of the colony through election. We see that even the founding document of the colony holds political principles, of course based on the constitutional structure of Great Britain’s government, that would endure through the life of John Adams, the War for Independence, and to the present day. Likewise, in the first “constitution” of the Massachusetts Bay Plantation, dated April 30, 1629, we see the same details of government as in the charter, with specific powers allotted to the governor, deputy governor, and council to the governor, all of whom would be selected annually by the settlers of the plantation. Practices which would play particularly important roles in Adams’s political philosophy were the veto power granted to the governor and the original structure of the council.³⁸ The unicameral structure of the latter contained the possibility of domination by a majority within the advisory body. Although the constitution of Massachusetts was later amended and a bicameral legislative body created, the question of whether a bicameral or a unicameral legislative branch would better secure liberty would stay relevant throughout Adams’s

³⁶ David McCullough, "John Adams and the Good Life of the Mind," *Records of the Academy* (American Academy of Arts and Sciences) (2002): 12.

³⁷ http://avalon.law.yale.edu/17th_century/mass03.asp (The Charter of Massachusetts Bay: 1629).

³⁸ http://www.winthropsociety.com/doc_const.php (Massachusetts Constitution of 1629).

life and well into the debates surrounding the new government of France. His support for a bicameral legislature in the federal government, as well as the states', would remain a notable pillar of his political philosophy, as we shall see in the next chapter.

Adams's advocacy of a government structure inherited from England, without, he emphasized, "hereditary nobility, feudal dues, and inquisitorial courts",³⁹ must be related to his understanding of human nature, which we can derive through a brief consideration of Puritanism, its principal values, and Adams's belief in the sinful nature of man.

Those who came in 1629 sought more than simply economic success or a safe haven to practice their particularly intense brand of Protestantism—Puritanism. John Winthrop and his followers sought to create a "city upon a hill," a community that would not only flourish in its own existence but serve as a model of virtue and justice for the rest of the world.⁴⁰ Puritanism, as it existed in reformed Protestant England, was rooted in the belief of *Sola Fide, Sola Gratia, Sola Scriptura*; "faith alone, grace alone, scripture alone."⁴¹ Though their roots lay in Martin Luther's reconsideration of Christianity's foundational texts,⁴² Puritans were particularly anti-Catholic and felt strongly, perhaps more than other Protestants, that the Pope was the anti-Christ. Like all Protestants, though, they believed fervently in personal salvation, and "were convinced that God pardoned sinners in response to... faith in Christ's redeeming sacrifice on the Cross."⁴³ There could be no redemption for sin through the purchase of indulgences, and, perhaps

³⁹ Timothy H. Breen, "John Adams' Fight against Innovation in the New England Constitution: 1776," *The New England Quarterly* 40 (1967): 504.

⁴⁰ Though a number of scholars explain Adams's republicanism of the 1760s and 1770s (as seen in *Thoughts on Government*) as a reaction to his own version of Winthrop's hope—that Americans would create a more pure society under a more perfect, uncorrupted version of England's loose constitutional structure—he was never so trusting of his fellow man as many of these scholars imply.

⁴¹ John Coffey and Paul C. H. Lim, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Puritanism* (New York: Cambridge University Press), 2.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*

most important, individuals were meant to circumvent the hierarchical structure of the Catholic Church and seek a direct connection with God. Even this basic framework of Protestant thought--the emphasis on Biblical education and salvation through inward righteousness--would have an influence on Adams's consummate determination to educate himself, even if without help from higher authorities or teachers, and is reflected in his almost tormented determination to maintain virtue in his own thought and behavior.⁴⁴

Puritanism's significance in the shaping of the Massachusetts Bay Colony is undisputed. The original settlers were bound by what they believed to be a special providence to create a government. There was an intensely religious society, a group that would base its existence on an obligation to God to spread virtue through the success of their settlement as a repayment for salvation. This implicit pressure to succeed would weigh heavily on the hearts of the colony's first settlers, and, as we shall see, would continue to affect men like John Adams, who for the first 20 years of his life expected to join the ministry.

It is not difficult to see the influence of Puritanism and early Puritan society in both Adams's character and his political thought. Born in Braintree, Massachusetts in 1735, Adams was a fourth-generation descendent of Henry Adams, who arrived in America in 1636. This earliest American relative was pious, frugal, and hardworking. When he died, he left a modest establishment to his family—a farm of forty acres—and a “modest library of treasured books.”⁴⁵ By the time John was born, the family's living situation had made only modest improvements; the Adams family “experienced life as a

⁴⁴ Bailyn, “Notes for a Sketch”, 244.

⁴⁵ John Patrick Diggins, *John Adams* (New York: Macmillan, 2003), 17.

challenge to moral character, an austere, demanding existence...with [New England] citizens worrying about the fate of their souls while debating the inscrutability of God's purposes" yet kept hopeful and lively through their family's "wealth of books, ideas, and stimulating conversation."⁴⁶ As a child, Adams was brought to a meetinghouse to listen to sermons "asking the congregation to turn to faith, and then to the town meeting to hear public issues discussed that asked citizens to rely upon reason,"⁴⁷ setting up an undeniable tension early in his life between religious faith and a pragmatic approach to the world.

As Page Smith explains concisely, "Protestant Christianity, Calvinist in its temper, if increasingly relaxed in its dogma, dominated [Braintree's] life...To spend one's boyhood in such a community meant to bear its imprint for life on the conscious and subconscious levels of one's existence."⁴⁸ Perhaps the most important effect of this highly religious environment on the character of the young Adams would be his attempt to reconcile what he had been taught in church with the demands and flaws of his psyche. Despite the extremely modest means of his youth, Adams was "impelled by a frantic desire for affluence and fame,"⁴⁹ and was mainly self-taught. He spent countless hours poring over classics, driving himself intellectually from sunrise to sunset. One concern dominates: that of his own reputation. Keeping a diary of progress and failures in the fight against vanity was a practice brought to New England by the Puritans, and his diary is littered with declarations about his own search for distinction among his peers and fame.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 18.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Page Smith, *John Adams* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1962), 5.

⁴⁹ Bailyn, "Notes for a Sketch", 243.

What am I doing? shall I sleep away my whole seventy years? no, by every thing I swear I will renounce this contemplative, and betake myself to an active, roving life by sea or land, or else I will attempt some uncommon, unexpected enterprise in law; let me lay the plan, and arouse spirit enough to push boldly. I swear I will push myself into business; I'll watch my opportunity to speak in court, and will strike with surprise—surprise bench, bar, jury, auditors and all. Activity, boldness, forwardness, will draw attention.⁵⁰

We see an early aversion to idleness—a vice, a violation of Puritan ideals--hammered into young Adams in the sermons of his youth, juxtaposed with a fierce determination for distinction and fame, and confidence that he will find them. Adams's early adulthood was marked by a struggle between his desire to be esteemed by others for his intellectual prowess and the Puritan condemnation of vanity, the belief that it was prideful and sinful to aspire to greatness. So intense was this tension that Adams wrote of it frequently throughout his diary, discussing his vices and admonishing himself for his inability to escape them. As Adams's reputation grew, eventually elevating him to positions of great respectability in the eyes of his contemporaries, so too would his inner conflict between ambition and piousness. Only once does he allude to a possible solution to his predicament:

Now let me form the great habits of thinking, writing, speaking. Let my whole courtship be applied to win the applause and admiration of Gridley, Pratt, Otis, Thacher, &c. Let love and vanity be extinguished, and the great passions of ambition, patriotism, break out and burn...I found a passion growing in my heart, and a consequent habit of thinking, forming and strengthening in my mind, that would have ate out every seed of ambition in the first, and every wise design or plan in the last.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Diary, January, 1759. (*Works* II: 59-60).

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

We read a convoluted argument offering an escape from the vices he was taught to loathe, the suggestion that it is only *through* attaining the distinction he so desperately seeks that he could rid himself of idleness, the search for fame, and his unyielding ambition. I will later argue that Adams would come to see his own vanity as innocuous to his ability to devote himself to what he saw as, ultimately, a life of service in the political world. He believed that the ability to evade the effects of the same passion that lay in every man was the sole distinguishing factor between those capable of fulfilling the role of executive chief, perhaps the most esteemed position in the land, and the rest of society.⁵² It is this quality in Adams that has only recently been expounded and lauded by historians, but one I believe Adams knew he and very few others possessed.

As we have seen, the first wave of Puritan immigrants were swift in adopting governmental structures for the Massachusetts Bay Colony very similar to those developed in Great Britain. And in turn, the positions of governor, deputy governor, and an advising body, later amended into two separate legislative houses, would be the model for the constitution that Adams designed for Massachusetts in 1779, which, in turn, would be the basis for the federal government's structure. This was due in great part to what Timothy H. Breen deems Adams's "struggle against innovation."⁵³ Breen notes that "few things awakened Adams' enthusiasm as quickly as a discussion about the meaning of New England heritage,"⁵⁴ pointing to a passage from the diary in which Adams wrote of Massachusetts that it was "the Opening of a grand scene and Design in Providence, for the Illumination of the Ignorant and the Emancipation of the slavish Part of Mankind all

⁵² For more on this theory, see Morgan, "Puritan Tradition".

⁵³ Timothy H. Breen, "John Adams' Fight against Innovation in the New England Constitution: 1776," *The New England Quarterly* 40 (1967).

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 501.

over the Earth."⁵⁵ He would work relentlessly to maintain the government the Puritans had established over a century prior to his birth, both during the revolutionary crisis of his day and in the 1790s, when he would argue for its implementation in other revolutionary nations, especially France. The government created by the Puritans, he believed, had been "more agreeable to the dignity of human nature than any they had seen in Europe."⁵⁶ Adams believed strongly in the appointment of a representative body, seeing the government structure and social mores inherited from the founders as the impenetrable barrier that had resisted the encroachment by the British on their liberties in his own revolutionary age.⁵⁷ In his *Dissertation on the Canon and Feudal Law*, Adams tells the story of the founding of America and its governments as a direct result of the Protestant Reformation and the rise of Puritanism:

The people grew more and more sensible of the wrong that was done them by these systems, more and more impatient under it, and determined at all hazards to rid themselves of it.... It was this great struggle that peopled America. It was not religion alone, as is commonly supposed; but it was a love of universal liberty, and a hatred, a dread, a horror, of the infernal confederacy [Catholic and feudal law] before described, that projected, conducted, and accomplished the settlement of America.... It was a resolution formed by a sensible people,—I mean the Puritans,—almost in despair. They had become intelligent in general, and many of them learned.... They were very far from being enemies to monarchy; and they knew as well as any men, the just regard and honor that is due to the character of a dispenser of the mysteries of the gospel of grace. But they saw clearly, that popular powers must be placed as a guard, a control, a balance, to the powers of the monarch and the priest....⁵⁸

I believe that this consideration of the Puritan origins of the Massachusetts Bay Colony is necessary for understanding the sources of Adams's beliefs about government.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ *A Dissertation on the Canon and Feudal Law*, 1765 (*Works* III: 453).

⁵⁷ Breen, "Fight against Innovation", 505.

⁵⁸ *A Dissertation on the Canon and Feudal Law*, 1765 (*Works* III: 451-53).

It is true that he was born a century after the founding of the Puritan Commonwealth, and, as Peter Shaw observes, the culture of the Commonwealth was becoming less severe in the eighteenth century; those who still internalized the prohibition against worldly gain could cope with their guilt through contributions to the public good rather than through self-denial.⁵⁹ John Adams certainly would seem to fall into this category. He questioned his motivation for every prominent position he sought, and tended to “subject himself to a period of atoning preparation” for it, similar to the way Puritans of the last century endeavored to “humble themselves” as they prepared to be “elected” by God.⁶⁰

We can see the influence of his Puritan heritage also in his frequent use of religious language to describe the ordeals of the colonists. In a letter to his wife, for example, when Boston was being besieged by British troops, he wrote, “The Tryals of that unhappy and devoted People are likely to be severe indeed. God grant that the Furnace of Affliction may refine them.”⁶¹ In another letter, written after the Continental Army had lost a battle at Quebec, he lamented, “it gives me inexpressible Grief that by our own Folly, and Wickedness, We should deserve it so very ill as We do,” explaining this defeat in terms of sin.⁶²

But the most important impact of Adams’s Puritan background was in his take on man’s innate tendencies, both noble and base. This began to take form as early as the 1750s, he said in retrospect, and would profoundly influence his political thought. It would lead him to champion the ideal, uncorrupted form of the British constitution and

⁵⁹ Peter Shaw, *The Character of John Adams* (University of North Carolina Press, 1976), 11.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁶¹ Letter to Abigail Adams, May 2, 1775.

<http://www.masshist.org/publications/apde/portia.php?id=AFC01d131>

⁶² Letter to James Warren, May 18, 1776.

<http://www.masshist.org/publications/apde/portia.php?id=PJA04d097>

eventually to reject the justifications put forward by supporters of the French Revolution, both in America and in Europe. In order to clarify these connections, though, it's important to establish that his vision of human nature in the years Appleby, Howe, and Wood regard as his most "republican" remained essentially unchanged in his lifetime. Though he would perhaps become *more* disillusioned with men as he witnessed what he continued to see as evidence of their innate vanity, instability, and desire for prestige, the basic worldview was developed at a young age, and there is evidence that at every stage of his life this vision informed an almost unvarying vision of proper governmental structure. Consider just two examples from his early writing that demonstrate the linkage between his understanding of human character and of government. In a diary entry from 1760, he observes

... all civil Government, is founded and maintained by the sins of the People. All armies would be needless if Men were universally virtuous. ...In short Vice and folly are so interwoven in all human Affairs that they could not possibly be wholly separated from them without tearing and rending the whole system of human Nature, and state.⁶³

His outlook at age 25 seems as wary as it would be at 55, when he commented to his cousin Samuel Adams that "if there were no ignorance, error, or vice, there would be neither principles nor systems of civil or political government."⁶⁴ A 1763 essay in the *Boston Gazette* is similarly cautionary:

As we know that ignorance, vanity, excessive ambition and venality, will, in spite of all human precautions, creep into government, and will ever be aspiring at extravagant and unconstitutional emoluments to individuals, let us never relax our attention, or our resolution, to keep these unhappy

⁶³ Diary, December 18, 1760. (*Works* II: 107).

⁶⁴ October 18, 1790. (*Works* VI: 415).

imperfections in human nature, out of which material, frail as it is, all our rulers must be compounded, under a strict inspection and a just control.⁶⁵

Though we will go back to the years leading up to the colonists' War for Independence, during the era in which some argue Adams held his most positive vision of society and men, let us first dismiss the possibility that Adams became disillusioned with religion as a result of his education. In a letter to his wife, Adams contended that

in a Time of War, and especially a War like this, one may see the Necessity and Utility, of the divine Prohibitions of Revenge, and the Injunctions of forgiveness of Injuries and love of Enemies, which We find in the Christian Religion. Unrestrained, in some degree by these benevolent Laws, Men would be Devils, at such a Time as this.⁶⁶

Whether or not Adams had rejected certain tenets of Calvinism, there was an important role for Christianity in curbing immorality that Adams *never* dismissed. He would see this even in Catholicism, the religion of the "Romish clergy," and would be inflamed by the attacks on the church in the French Revolution. Religion curtailed unrestrained passion, and Adams devoted his life to this task—the preservation of liberty *through* the check on men's innate vices by the proper form of government. In 1796, the year in which Adams would rail against the moral justifications for the French Revolution espoused by Mary Wollstonecraft, he made an unequivocal case for the benefits of Christianity in aiding this task:

One great Advantage of the Christian Religion is that it brings the great Principle of the Law of Nature and Nations, Love your Neighbour as yourself, and do to others as you would that others should do to you, to the Knowledge, Belief and Veneration of the whole People. Children, Servants, Women and Men are all Professors in the science of public as

⁶⁵ August 29, 1763. (*Works* III: 437).

⁶⁶ Letter to Abigail Adams, March 14th, 1777.

<http://www.masshist.org/publications/apde/portia.php?id=AFC02d129>

well as private Morality. No other Institution for Education, no kind of political Discipline, could diffuse this kind of necessary Information, so universally among all Ranks and Descriptions of Citizens.⁶⁷

The important role Adams assigns to the basic tenets of Christianity, even this late in life, when he has perhaps lost some of his own religiosity, is echoed in his opposition to what he views as both Wollstonecraft's and the revolution's attack on the institution—a sure path to destruction of any goodness left in mankind despite the “Mass of Corruption human Nature has been in general, since the Fall of Adam.”⁶⁸

Wollstonecraft (like Adams), laments the loss of morality in the excesses of the revolution, but she sees this lapse as a result of the "deformation" of French character under the old governmental regime:

The character of the French, indeed, had been so depraved by the inveterate despotism of ages, that even amidst the heroism which distinguished the taking of the Bastille, we are forced to see that suspicious tempter, and that vain ambition of dazzling, which have generated all the succeeding follies and crimes. For, even in the most public-spirited actions, celebrity seems to have been the spur, and the glory, rather than the happiness of Frenchmen, the end—This observation inforces the grand truth on mankind, that without morality there can be no great strength of understanding, or real dignity of conduct. The morals of the whole nation were destroyed by the manners formed by the government.⁶⁹

Adams thunders his response in the margin: “Whence is this morality to come? If the Christian religion and all the power of government has never produced it what will? Yet this mad woman is for destroying the Christian religion!”⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Diary, August 14, 1796 (*Works* III: 423).

⁶⁸ Diary, December 31, 1772. <http://www.masshist.org/publications/apde/portia.php?id=DJA02d085>

⁶⁹ Mary Wollstonecraft, *An Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution and the Effect it Has Produced in Europe* (London: J. Johnson, 1795), 252.

⁷⁰ HMV marginalia, 252.

This excerpt is an excellent summary of Wollstonecraft's views of human character and both the potential and the horrors of the French Revolution. Her book is an attempt to understand the violent progression of a movement she had unbounded hopes for in its early days, when she went to Paris from England in 1792. In its most basic form, her argument regarding the violent turn of events and the stagnancy of France's progress centers on a belief that the French had simply conducted themselves in the manner in which they had been taught. The aristocracy and absolute monarchy had retarded the spread of reason and thus the progress of moral development among the French. Adams finds Wollstonecraft's faith in the potential of reason to control the passions infuriatingly naïve. She believes in an inevitable progression of reason, the cultivation of which produces liberty. Likewise, she identifies a logical progression from this increase in intellectual capacity to greater happiness in society. Through this universal understanding and happiness, she predicts, an elimination of and repulsion by "distinctions" within society will occur in every man: "As the world is becoming wiser, it must become happier... The improvement of the understanding will prevent those baneful excesses of passion which poison the heart."⁷¹ Adams's comment: "This is the burden of her song. If the world grows wiser, it will grow more sensible of the emulation of the human heart and provide checks to it..." On the contrary, he adds, "The understanding will only make rivalries more subtle and scientific and the passions will never be prevented; they can only be balanced." He inverts Wollstonecraft's ranking of the strength of reason compared to the passions. This is a belief that goes back at least to this diary entry from 1772: "We see every Day, that our Imaginations are so strong and our Reason so weak... that Men find Ways to persuade themselves, to believe any

⁷¹ Ibid, 476-77.

Absurdity, to submit to any Prostitution, rather than forego their Wishes and Desires.

Their Reason becomes at last an eloquent Advocate on the Side of their Passions...."⁷²

For Adams, human behavior is primarily driven by emotions, with reason as the "lawyer" for the passions. In the *Defence of the Constitutions*, Adams discusses the predominance of the self-serving emotions.

Though we allow benevolence and generous affections to exist in the human breast, yet every moral theorist will admit the selfish *passions* in the generality of men to be the strongest. There are few who love the public better than themselves, though all may have some affection for the public. We are not, indeed, commanded to love our neighbor better than ourselves. Self-interest, private avidity, ambition, and avarice, will exist in every state of society, and under every form of government.⁷³

The most influential of the human passions is the desire for distinction in the eyes of others. This compulsion is unchanging, and it underlies the thirst for power. This striving for distinction gives rise to a "natural aristocracy" in every society.⁷⁴ Adams discusses this drive as early as 1765, when, in the *Dissertation on Canon and Feudal Law*, he refers to it as the "love of power":

The love of power, which has been so often the cause of slavery,—has, whenever freedom has existed, been the cause of freedom. If it is this principle that has always prompted the princes and nobles of the earth, by every species of fraud and violence to shake off all the limitations of their power, it is the same that has always stimulated the common people to aspire at independency, and to endeavor at confining the power of the great within the limits of equity and reason.⁷⁵

⁷² Diary, February 9, 1772 (*Works* II, 294-5).

⁷³ *A Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States of America*, vol 3, 1788. (*Works* VI: 57).

⁷⁴ The next chapter will discuss the implications for government that Adams draws from this aspect of human nature.

⁷⁵ *Works* III, 448.

In the *Discourses on Davila* (1790), the love of power has become "the passion for distinction." This discussion is one of the most interesting passages in all of Adams's works and is worth quoting at length.

There is none among [the natural human traits] more essential or remarkable, than the *passion for distinction*. A desire to be observed, considered, esteemed, praised, beloved, and admired by his fellows, is one of the earliest, as well as keenest dispositions discovered in the heart of man. If any one should doubt the existence of this propensity, let him go and attentively observe the journeymen and apprentices in the first workshop, or the oarsmen in a cockboat, a family or a neighborhood, the inhabitants of a house or the crew of a ship, a school or a college, a city or a village, a savage or civilized people, a hospital or a church, the bar or the exchange, a camp or a court. Wherever men, women, or children, are to be found, whether they be old or young, rich or poor, high or low, wise or foolish, ignorant or learned, every individual is seen to be strongly actuated by a desire to be seen, heard, talked of, approved and respected, by the people about him, and within his knowledge.⁷⁶

.... If we attempt to analyze our ideas still further upon this subject, we shall find, that the expressions we have hitherto used, *attention*, *consideration*, and *congratulation*, comprehend with sufficient accuracy the general object of the *passion for distinction*, in the greater part of mankind. There are not a few—from him who burned a temple, to the multitudes who plunge into low debauchery—who deliberately seek it by crimes and vices. The greater number, however, search *for* it, neither by vices nor virtues; but by the means which common sense and every day's experience show, are most sure to obtain it; by riches, by family records, by play, and other frivolous personal accomplishments. But there are a few, and God knows, but a few, who aim at something more. They aim at approbation as well as attention; at esteem as well as consideration; and at admiration and gratitude, as well as congratulation.⁷⁷

Note that he conceives of this ceaseless striving as a double-edged sword, a trait responsible for both contributions to society and the worst in human behavior.

⁷⁶ *Discourses on Davila*, 1790 (*Works* VI: 232).

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 248.

Given his belief in the insistence of this drive, it is not surprising that Adams believes that the quest to eliminate hierarchies from any society, including revolutionary France, is bound to fail.

We are told that our friends, the National Assembly of France, have abolished all distinctions. But be not deceived, my dear countrymen. Impossibilities cannot be performed. Have they levelled all fortunes and equally divided all property...made all men and women equally wise, elegant, and beautiful...committed to the flames all the records, annals, and histories of the nation... burned all their pictures, and broken all their statues...blotted out of all memories, the names, places of abode, and illustrious actions of all their ancestors? Have they not still princes of the first and second order, nobles and knights? Have they no record nor memory who are the men who compose the present national assembly? Do they wish to have that distinction forgotten?⁷⁸

And, it is equally unsurprising that he was contemptuous of Wollstonecraft's repeated declarations that the growth of reason would eventually eliminate social and political hierarchies: "Her enmity to monarchy and hierarchy is as strong as that of the republicans who beheaded Charles I. It would be laudable if she would reveal to us any way of getting rid of them but by substituting greater evils in Europe."⁷⁹

In this chapter I have tried to show that the origins of Adams's political philosophy can be found in the highly religious culture in which he was raised, that of the Massachusetts Puritans. Although he was a century removed from the founding of the Commonwealth, the influence of the Puritans can be seen in his constant self-criticism, his view of historical events, and, most important, his view of human nature. In the next chapter, I will explore the implications of his understanding of that nature for the structure of government.

⁷⁸ *Davila* (*Works* VI: 270).

⁷⁹ HVM marginalia, 415.

Chapter 3: Striking the Balance

If one understands John Adams's lifelong preoccupation with the non-rational aspect of human nature, it becomes difficult to believe that his views on government, which he understood as necessary to control the dangerous potential of human passions, would have changed markedly. Beginning with his later works and moving backward in time, we find that the major political ideas presented in those works—*Defence of the Constitutions* and *Discourses on Davila*, and also expressed in his fiery marginal notes on Wollstonecraft's book on the French Revolution—can be found as well in his early works, including *A Dissertation on the Canon and Feudal Law* and *Thoughts on Government*, and even earlier, in both published essays and unpublished works, including letters and, as discussed in the previous chapter, his diary entries. Though he may appear to have undergone a shift away from the revolutionary republicanism of his early years in public life to “conservatism” in his older age, Adams actually maintained a predominantly consistent political philosophy because of his consistent view of human nature. As we have seen, Adams held a lifelong belief in innate ambition and self-interestedness, both of which had to be curtailed in any society in order to maintain political liberty, but which would lead to a natural hierarchy even in a free society. Likewise, he believed that the drive for distinction was not equal in every man; his own nature, we have seen, greatly informed this belief. Thus, an elite class would always emerge in every society, having accumulated more money or more knowledge or more fame. The only means to prevent the elite from dominating the people at large, Adams believed, was a complex government that would balance the different interests within society.

Adams also looked to religion as a means of controlling man's vices, despite a decline in his own belief beginning in his years at Harvard.⁸⁰ Christianity played an important role in curtailing man's deeply competitive nature, Adams contended. Although he was no admirer of Catholicism, one of his most impassioned objections to the behavior of the revolutionary French was their assault on the Church, such as the nationalization of Church lands and requirement that priests take an oath supporting the new government.⁸¹ But, again, the most important control in any society was proper governmental institutions. In 1796, when Adams took to Wollstonecraft's work,⁸² he wrote of the French:

Man always has conducted in the same way when his passions were not restrained.... Under color of destroying unnatural distinctions and veteran prejudices, they have destroyed all the institutions to which they owe their superiority to Asia and Africa.⁸³

Adams's belief in a social hierarchy, as we have seen, was formed long before the French Revolution and perhaps even prior to the American movement for independence. The quest for distinction was the human quality which most influenced his wariness of democratic republics from his earliest speculations on government.

Adams, like other political philosophers on both sides of the Atlantic, operated in terms of the classical categories of government inherited from the Greeks: monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy, which differed in terms of who held political power. A monarchy had the advantage of efficiency, because a single person governed. The

⁸⁰ John Patrick Diggins, *John Adams* (Times Books, 2003), 19.

⁸¹ William Doyle, *The Oxford History of the French Revolution*, 2nd ed. (Oxford University Press, 2002), 132-3, 144-5.

⁸² Mary Wollstonecraft, *An Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution and the Effect it Has Produced in Europe* (London: J. Johnson, 1795).

⁸³ Marginalia in *Historical and Moral View* (HMV), 305.

disadvantage was the potential of a monarchy to turn into a despotism. An aristocracy, rule by a few wealthy men, had the potential advantage of governance by the best educated stratum of society, but contained the ever-present danger of oligarchy, where the few ruled to their own advantage. And in a democracy, power was held by the people as a whole. This form of government provided the greatest amount of freedom to the common man, but it could degenerate into anarchy.

Both of Adams's great tomes, *Defence* and *Davila*, were devoted to displaying the inevitable tendency of any government based on only one or two of these forms to degenerate. Only a government that combined all three forms and gave each form the right to block the actions of the others—a veto—had any hope of enduring, because only such a government could balance the competing interests of the common man and the elite, a segment that would, again, inevitably arise in any nation. Howe and Appleby, the main proponents of the change position, do not appreciate sufficiently how early Adams formed his belief in the inevitability of an aristocratic segment of society and the necessity for a balanced government.⁸⁴ Indeed, such beliefs were cultural commonplaces among educated Americans. They were more or less universal among what Gordon Wood calls the American "Whigs," the American intellectuals in rebellion against Great Britain, and many believed that an aristocracy was even *necessary*: "That some sort of aristocracy, 'consisting of a small number of the ablest men in the nation,' was necessary for the stability of their mixed republics few Whigs denied.... The Revolutionaries were generally confident that there existed in the community a 'Senatorial part,' a natural social

⁸⁴ Joyce Appleby, "The New Republican Synthesis and the Changing Political Ideas of John Adams," *American Quarterly* 25 (1973), 578-95 and John R. Howe, Jr., *The Changing Political Thought of John Adams* (Princeton University Press, 1966).

and intellectual elite who, now that the Crown was gone, would find their rightful place in the upper houses of the legislatures."⁸⁵

Whether or not John Adams felt that an aristocracy was necessary for a republic to survive, he clearly expected one to emerge and that it was imperative that it be given a specific place in the governmental structure. As he states in the *Defence*, "The rich, the well-born, and the able, acquire an influence among the people that will soon be too much for simple honesty and plain sense, in a house of representatives. The most illustrious of them must, therefore, be separated from the mass, and placed by themselves in a senate; this is, to all honest and useful intents, an ostracism."⁸⁶ But, again, this belief is clear earlier than in 1787, i.e., in the years in which he had supposedly lost his optimism about the possibility of an egalitarian republic.

We can see this belief built into the very constitution that Adams designed, the Massachusetts Constitution, which he drafted in 1779.⁸⁷ The governor, senators, and representatives were to be elected by persons with a certain income or estate value. More to the point, though, whereas the number of representatives each county had was to be proportional to the population of the county, the number of senators would be based on how much tax each county paid, so that wealthier counties would have more senators. And while both representatives and senators had to meet a property threshold, the threshold for the senate was three times that for the house. It is obvious that Adams's constitution, and those of most of the other states, which were designed under the influence of his *Thoughts on Government*, was modeled on the British system, which

⁸⁵ Gordon S. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic* (The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 208-9.

⁸⁶ *Defence of the Constitutions* (*Works* IV: 290).

⁸⁷ George C. Homans, "John Adams and the Constitution of Massachusetts," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 125 (1981): 286-91.

balanced the "orders" of society in what Adams believed to be the only way that would produce a lasting republic. Although in classical political theory, the aristocracy was not defined primarily in terms of wealth but by superior wisdom, the Massachusetts constitution (and others) would use wealth as a substitute qualification for the senate--the aristocratic part of the legislature.⁸⁸

It is important to make a distinction between a belief in a "natural" aristocracy, which most of Adams peers thought inevitable and, some believed, desirable, and one based on inherited legal and political privileges, such as the British peerage that controlled the House of Lords. Adams explicitly rejected the idea of an "official" hereditary nobility in America like the peerage of England, but he certainly believed in the existence of something like an American nobility. In 1790, Adams asserts to Samuel Adams that "nobles there are, as I have before proved, in Boston as well as in Madrid."⁸⁹ The same belief in an American aristocracy can be found in a 1775 letter to Joseph Hawley. Adams notes that the "Gentlemen" of the nine southern colonies objected to raising the pay of army privates: "These Gentlemen are accustomed, habituated to higher Notions of themselves and the Distinction between them and the common People, than We [in the northern colonies] are."⁹⁰ And in another letter from the same period, Adams argues against the suggestion of eliminating property qualifications for voting, asserting that doing so "tends to confound and destroy all Distinctions, and prostrate all Ranks, to one common Levell."⁹¹ This comment suggests either that Adams *approves of* the social

⁸⁸ Gordon S. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic* (The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 217-22.

⁸⁹ Letter to Samuel Adams, October 18, 1790. (*Works* VI: 420).

⁹⁰ Letter to Joseph Hawley, November 25, 1775. (*Works* IX: 367).

⁹¹ Letter to James Sullivan, May 26, 1776. (*Works* IX: 378).

hierarchy he believes is inevitable or, at least, that it would be a mistake to create a policy that does not recognize the reality of the hierarchy.

As for Adams's belief in the necessity of balancing the segments of society, it, too, can be found in his early work, even if he is not as explicit in those years about exactly *what* is to be balanced. As discussed above, it was embodied in the constitution he designed, and his *Thoughts on Government* was a blueprint for balanced republican governments. In his (unpublished) notes for a lecture to be delivered in Braintree, Massachusetts in 1772, he summarizes the basic forms of government and argues, as he would throughout his career, for balanced government, observing, "Liberty depends upon an exact Ballance, a nice Counterpoise of all the Powers of the state."⁹² It seems clear that what he means by "Powers of the state" is the political influence of the various "estates" of society—the democratic, aristocratic, and monarchical sectors.

There is nothing novel about the assertion that many of the ideological roots of the American Revolution lay in Europe. Despite the colonists' growing insistence on independence *from* Great Britain in the 1770s, the Enlightenment, English liberalism, and the constitution of Great Britain were key influences in the ideas and actions of the revolutionary intellectuals.⁹³ Similarly, it would not come as a surprise to most familiar with the American Revolution that the American federal constitution, in its final form, was explicitly modeled on the constitutional structure of Great Britain. It is not, however, as common to appreciate the role John Adams played in the maintenance of this governmental form. Though some acknowledge the importance of his original draft of the Constitution of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts in the framing of the federal

⁹² Notes for an Oration at Braintree (Spring 1772).

<http://www.masshist.org/publications/apde/portia.php?id=DJA02d067>

⁹³ Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Harvard University Press, 1967).

constitution and thus the federal government, Adams is not given enough credit as a political theorist, at least in part due to the conservative shift some historians contend took place in his political thought after his radical youth and revolutionary fervor.

While Adams was and is still often criticized for an apparent sympathy towards monarchism and affection for aristocracy, those who made and make these accusations ignore key aspects of his thought. Adams was not the “least enlightened” of the Founding Fathers, as Gordon Wood asserted in the preface to the 1998 re-publication of his 1969 *Creation of the American Republic*.⁹⁴ In fact, Adams devoted his life to the study of constitutional forms. Likewise, Wood’s assertion that unlike Jefferson, Adams remained overly preoccupied with Old World society and institutions and thus failed to see the possibility for egalitarianism and liberty in America is debatable.⁹⁵ Adams was keenly aware of the nature of the society in which he lived, its potential for self-government, and the limits on that potential. And indeed, anyone familiar with his *Dissertation on the Canon and Feudal Law* will agree that Adams did believe that colonists in America had a great opportunity to establish a government more similar to that of the uncorrupted constitution of Great Britain than any which had yet existed. But he was never so blinded by this enthusiasm as to forget the inevitable stratification of society, and thus was never as fully inclined toward democracy as historians who see a later change have suggested. He did not go from no fear of the few (the elite) early in life to fear of the many in his later years, as Howe argued, or begin to associate sectors of society—the few and the many—to the sectors of government and fear democracy only later in life, as Appleby claimed. He was *consistently* wary, from early on, of the

⁹⁴ Gordon S. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic* (The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), xi.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

potential of the powerful to undermine democracy, and his assignment of different strata of society to different parts of the government occurred well before the 1780s. At least as early as the years of his first published words, he felt that only one form of government—a republican monarchy—could guarantee both freedom and order. Exactly what he thought a republican monarchy consisted of will be discussed in the next chapter.

What we see, ultimately, is that Adams, like most eighteenth-century theorists of human nature, was a universalist; he believed that, despite cultural differences, human character did not vary from one culture to another. His extensive historical studies proved to him that the dangerous aspects of that nature could not be tamed, only controlled through the proper governmental institutions. As usual, we find his most pointed—if not most eloquent—statements of these beliefs in his comments on Wollstonecraft’s account of the French Revolution and of the French itself.

The improvement, the exaltation of the human character, the perfectibility of man, the perfection of the human faculties are the divine object which her enthusiasm beholds in beatific vision. Alas, how airy and baseless a fabric! Yet she will not admit of the only means that can accomplish any part of her ardent prophecies: forms of government, so mixed, combined, and balanced as to restrain the passions of all orders of men.⁹⁶

The “airy,” “baseless” fabric to which Adams refers is what Wollstonecraft believes is the inevitable development of human rationality.

Wollstonecraft, like Anne Robert Jacques Turgot, his disciple the Marquis de Condorcet, and other (though not all)⁹⁷ philosophes, shared an optimism for the progress of the human mind in France and universally. Wollstonecraft argued that the excessive

⁹⁶ HMV marginalia, iv.

⁹⁷ Both Rousseau and Voltaire, like Wollstonecraft, rejected religious doctrines of human sinfulness, but they were much more skeptical about the possibility of perfecting society.

bloodshed of the revolution's first year was a result of the Old Regime's retardation of intellectual progress. The now possible cultivation of knowledge and pervasive hunger for liberty, though, would eventually lead to a more egalitarian society and a more republican government. And inseparable from this optimistic view of human nature was an ideal government wholly different from Adams's. Her comment provides a concise summary of the essential debate between Wollstonecraft and the philosophes who shared her optimism about man's nature and progress, and, on the other side, Adams, whose pessimistic view on the same topic, developed as a young man, had only been solidified with age.

Later in her work, the critical difference between these two visions of human nature takes a more explicit form.

The elegance of the palaces and buildings is revolting, when they are viewed as prisons, and the sprightliness of the people disgusting, when they are hastening to view the operations of the guillotine, or carelessly passing over the earth stained with blood. Exasperated humanity then, with bitterness of soul, devotes the city to destruction; whilst turning from such a nest of crimes, it seeks for consolation only in the conviction, that as the world is growing wiser, it must become happier; and that, as the cultivation of the soil meliorates a climate, the improvement of the understanding will prevent those baneful excesses of passion which poison the heart.⁹⁸

This passage embodies the core argument of her lengthy work: the implicit assertion that the violence of the "October Days" of 1789 and The Terror of 1793-1794, which she witnessed as she was writing but tellingly leaves out of her work, though appalling to her, were a result of uncultivated minds and morals corrupted by those who benefited from the "excesses of passion" or "unnatural distinctions" of hereditary privilege—royalty and

⁹⁸ Ibid., 477

aristocracy. She explains that the moral basis for the Revolution (and the reason it began) was the spread of reason and wisdom, with an eventual result the flourishing of happiness through more egalitarianism. Inflamed at her naïveté and that of men like Turgot, Condorcet, and eventually even Thomas Jefferson, Adams strongly disagreed with this sentiment. Shays's Rebellion had shaken Adams to his core. Though he believed deeply in the right of the American colonists to use violence to protect their liberty, a rebellion after the implementation of what he felt was a *nearly* perfect government in Massachusetts was only evidence of the need for more control, better laws, and a stronger federal government.

Next to Wollstonecraft's declaration on the French Revolution above, he writes, "The understanding will only make rivalries more subtle and scientific and the passions will never be prevented; they can only be balanced."⁹⁹ He rejects the notion that the improvement of human faculties would lead to more equality and thus more happiness. Promoting the spread of knowledge and cultivation of the mind among men would never be a reason to alter government through a simplification of its institutions (the latter proposal rousing his fury at every point in his life); this would always lead to a loss of freedom for society at large, because there would *always* be variation in levels of ambition and innumerable other distinctions. These were ineradicable, and only a complex government could contain them. In 1790, one year after the October Days, Adams wrote to his cousin Samuel Adams, who was closer to Wollstonecraft in holding what Adams saw as a dangerous optimism and lack of pragmatism:

You agree, that there are undoubtedly principles of political architecture.
But, instead of particularizing any of them, you seem to place all your

⁹⁹ HMV marginalia, 477.

hopes in the universal, or at least more general, prevalence of knowledge and benevolence. I think with you, that knowledge and benevolence ought to be promoted as much as possible; but, despairing of ever seeing them sufficiently general for the security of society, I am for seeking institutions which may supply in some degree the defect. If there were no ignorance, error, or vice, there would be neither principles nor systems of civil or political government.¹⁰⁰

Thus, government should not be simplified, as Wollstonecraft and those of like mind argued. The unicameral legislative body being adopted in France (and in some American states) would not prevent certain factions of society—perhaps the wealthier, more ambitious, or more intelligent, to name a few of the innumerable possible bases for social and political distinction-- from dominating the legislative process at the expense of the less influential members of society.

Wollstonecraft found the “complication” of government, i.e., balanced government, not only unnecessary but also harmful and deceptive. She attributes the degeneracy of the lower orders in society to the fallacies of the Old Regime, including the unnecessary complexity in constitutional form.

The complication of laws in every country has tended to bewilder the understanding of man in the science of government; and whilst artful politicians have taken advantage of the ignorance or credulity of their fellow citizens, it was impossible to prevent a degeneracy of morals, because impunity will always be a stimulus to the passions. ...It will require a simplification of laws, an establishment of equal rights, and the responsibility of ministers, to secure a just and enlightened policy. ...And we ought not to be discouraged from attempting this simplification, because no country has yet been able to do it; since it seems clear, that manners and government have been in a continual and progressive state of improvement, and that the extension of knowledge, a truth capable of demonstration, was never at any period so general as at present.¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰ October 18, 1790 (*Works* VI, 414-5).

¹⁰¹ Wollstonecraft, *Historical and Moral View*, 217.

Though Adams had been deeply involved in the debate over constitutional forms in America during the adoption of one or the other form by different states, the attack on bicameralism by French writers, most notably Turgot and Condorcet, sparked his public and private reactions anew, prompting him to write at length in his unwavering belief in the absolute necessity of checks and balances.

It is interesting that this debate is most often discussed in its transatlantic context. That is, scholars are more apt to discuss the argument as one between the Adams-led Federalists against the French philosophes and their American counterparts, the Republicans, including Adams's former friend, Thomas Jefferson, than in its American context alone. In other words, a number of historians overlook Adams's long-standing interest in questions of constitutional form, often placing him in the debate between thinkers only in the context of the onset of the French Revolution—for a change theorist, Adams's newly conservative years. They argue that it was with the attacks on balanced government in Britain and even the monarchy of France (and, eventually, America) that Adams was forced to reconsider his faith in man and his affection for democratic republicanism. Specifically, questions regarding constitutional form, these historians have argued, were most pertinent in the wake of the Constituent Assembly's adoption of a unicameral legislature for France's new republic in 1789.¹⁰² Though many of the relevant players in both Europe and America had perhaps only begun to consider these questions as a result of the revolutions in America and France, Adams had begun the study of government years earlier and, as discussed above, had long been an advocate of balanced government.

¹⁰² Daniel I. O'Neill, "John Adams versus Mary Wollstonecraft on the French Revolution and Democracy," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 68 (2007): 451-76; C. Bradley Thompson, "John Adams and the Coming of the French Revolution," *Journal of the Early Republic*: 16 (1996): 361-87.

To reiterate, Adams's ideal system entailed a balance between governmental components as a means of balancing the inevitable interests and factions of society—divisions that are the inevitable result of the human quest for social status. Though Adams also believed deeply in an independent judicial branch, it is the balance within the legislative branch and between the legislature and the executive that is his most enduring concern. (Actually, Adams sometimes spoke of the monarch in Britain and the executive in America as the third component in a three-part *legislature*, with the executive, the lower house, and the upper house each having the ability to veto the actions of the other.) His commitment to balanced government can be traced throughout the course of his public life, from his “most conservative” back to his “republican” period. Under the influence of those whom he had studied and whose political systems he had scrutinized, including Polybius, Cicero, Tacitus, Montesquieu, Gibbon, and, as Joyce Appleby emphasizes, De Lolme,¹⁰³ Adams promoted balanced government religiously.

Discourses on Davila (1790) was written in response to the events in France and to an attack on bicameralism by Condorcet, *Lettres d'un Bourgeois de New-Heaven*, which was also clearly a critique of Adams's *Defence*.¹⁰⁴ Adams wrote of the old rivalry between the French King and the three estates as a mirror of the situation in France after the attempt to “blot out” distinctions, especially those of hereditary privilege, in the early days of the Revolution:

¹⁰³ Joyce Appleby, “New Republican Synthesis.”

¹⁰⁴ *Lettres d'un Bourgeois de New-Heaven* (1788). Like other proponents of the French Revolution, Condorcet did not approve of the creation of an upper chamber in the American governments, seeing it as unnecessary given the absence of an aristocracy in America. It is not known whether Condorcet, who had recently been made an honorary citizen of New Haven, misspelled the town accidentally or as a joke. See Zoltan Haraszti, “John Adams Flays a Philosophe: Annotations on Condorcet's *Progress of the Human Mind*,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 7 (1950): 223-54.

There was always a rivalry between the royal authority and that of the States, as there is now between the power of the King and that of the National Assembly, and as there ever was and will be in every legislature or sovereignty which consists of two branches only. The proper remedy then, would have been the same as it must be now, to new-model the legislature, make it consist of three equiponderant, independent branches, and make the executive power one of them; in this way, and in no other, can an equilibrium be formed, the only antidote against rivalries... In short, every man and every body of men is and has a rival. When the struggle is only between two, whether individuals or bodies, it continues till one is swallowed up or annihilated, and the other becomes absolute master. As all this is a necessary consequence and effect of the emulation which nature has implanted in our bosoms, it is wonderful that mankind have so long been ignorant of the remedy, when a third party for an umpire is one so easy and obvious.¹⁰⁵

The “easy and obvious” umpire was the king, who would provide the essential balance.¹⁰⁶

This was a feature of the “true,” uncorrupted British constitution. That government was a “complex arrangement, built up in stages, from Magna Carta in 1215 to the Bill of Rights in 1689 and the Act of Settlement of 1701, whereby King, Lords, and Commons all set limits on each other, and on themselves, and gradually joined into one legislature.”¹⁰⁷ The corruption of the ideal British constitutional form in Adams’s lifetime was widely agreed on; Adams and many of his contemporaries (including Thomas Jefferson) believed the corruption lay in the interference in Parliament by the king's ministers, including placing appointees in the House of Commons and in other ways buying the support of members.

¹⁰⁵ *Discourses on Davila* (*Works* VI: 323).

¹⁰⁶ In a marginal note on his own copy of *Davila* in 1813 and included in the *Works* version of *Davila* (VI: 323), Adams comments on the 1789 vote by the French National Constituent Assembly for a unicameral legislature and a “suspensive” (not absolute) veto power for the king:

“Ellsworth moved in senate a vote of approbation of this constitution. I was obliged to put the question, and it stands upon record. Madison moved a vote of admiration in the house, and it was recorded there. Washington, Jefferson, and all admired it. John Adams alone detested it. Talleyrand asked me what I thought of the executive power in it. I answered, ‘the king is Daniel in the lion’s den; if he ever gets out alive, it must be by miracle.’ Talleyrand again asked my opinion of the executive power in a subsequent constitution. I answered, ‘It is Shadrach, Meshech, and Abednego in the fiery furnace. If they escape alive, it must be because fire will not burn. This constitution cannot last longer than the other.’”

¹⁰⁷ Richard Alan Ryerson, “‘Like a Hare before the Hunters’: John Adams and the Idea of Republican Monarchy,” *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society* 107 (1995): 26.

Though it took many years for colonists to turn on George III, his culpability, too, was widely claimed by the start of the American Revolution. But Adams insisted on drawing a distinction between this corrupted version of the British system and the way it was supposed to work and could work in America.

The English constitution is, in theory ...the most stupendous fabric of human invention....The Americans ought to be applauded instead of censured, for imitating it as far as they have done...The Americans have not indeed imitated it in giving a negative upon their legislature to the executive power; in this respect their balances are incomplete, very much I confess to my mortification.... They have not made their first magistrates nor their senators hereditary. Here they differ from the English constitution, and with great propriety.¹⁰⁸

Both of these mature works—*Defence of the Constitutions* and *Davila*, are cited by change theorists as evidence of Adams's turn towards conservatism in the 1780s. But, in fact, they merely develop explicitly principles that can be seen in his earliest considerations of social distinctions as a reflection of the "passion for distinction" and differences between members of society, some innate and some due to circumstances, and his ideas about the only kind of republican government that could accommodate those things. His *Thoughts on Government* espouses the same basic balance as this praise in *Defence* implies, as does his admiration for the actions of his Puritan ancestors in *A Dissertation on the Canon and Feudal Law*, his *Novanglus* series, and others of his earliest essays.

In 1765, a London newspaper printed four letters on the Stamp Act crisis by an author by the pseudonym of William Pym.¹⁰⁹ Pym's second letter was reprinted in the

¹⁰⁸ *A Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States of America*, 1788 (*Works* IV: 358).

¹⁰⁹ The writer had mistaken John Pym's first name for William. John Pym was a member of the English Parliament in the seventeenth century.

Boston Evening Post in November of 1765. Adams, writing as the Earl of Clarendon, responded to Pym in three installments between January 13 and 27, 1766.¹¹⁰ Pym's letter accused the colonists of not understanding the British constitution. A series of responses by Clarendon (Adams) appeared in the *Boston Gazette* in January 1766. Adams relates his understanding of the relations among the various parts of the British government, detailing the way in which the structure is designed to ensure liberty and justice for the subjects.

Some have called it the most perfect combination of human powers in society which finite wisdom has yet contrived and reduced to practice for the preservation of liberty and the production of happiness....Were I to define the British constitution, therefore, I should say, it is a limited monarchy, or a mixture of the three forms of government commonly known in the schools, reserving as much of the monarchial splendor, the aristocratical independency, and the democratical freedom, as are necessary, that each of these powers may have a controul both in legislation and execution, over the other two, for the preservation of the subject's liberty....¹¹¹

Adams describes the aspects of the system that ensure justice for the commoners: the election of the House of Commons and trial by jury, with independent judges:

Thus it seems to appear that two branches of popular power, voting for members of the house of commons, and tryals by juries, the one in the legislative and the other in the executive part of the constitution are as essential and fundamental, to the great end of it, the preservation of the subject's liberty, to preserve the balance and mixture of the government, and to prevent its running into an oligarchy or aristocracy; as the lords and commons are to prevent its becoming an absolute monarchy.... This is that constitution which has prevailed in Britain from an immense antiquity: It prevailed, and the House of Commons and tryals by juries made a part of it, in Saxon times, as may be abundantly proved by many monuments still remaining in the Saxon language: That constitution which

¹¹⁰ Clarendon was a historian and advisor to the king in the seventeenth century.

¹¹¹ *Works* III: 477-480.

...has never yet failed to work the ruin of the authors of all settled attempts to destroy it.¹¹²

Similarly, in an essay published in 1763, long before *Thoughts on Government*, which historians have cited as Adams's most republican work, Adams writes didactically on the inevitability of corruption in government because of innate vice in human nature.

...As we know that ignorance, vanity, excessive ambition and venality, will, in spite of all human precautions, creep into government, and will ever be aspiring at extravagant and unconstitutional emoluments to individuals, let us never relax our attention, or our resolution, to keep these unhappy imperfections in human nature, out of which material, frail as it is, all our rulers must be compounded, under a strict inspection and a just control. We electors have an important constitutional power placed in our hands; we have a check upon two branches of the legislature, as each branch has upon the other two; the power I mean of electing, at stated periods, one branch, which branch has the power of electing another.¹¹³ It becomes necessary to every subject then, to be in some degree a statesman, and to examine and judge for himself of the tendency of political principles and measures.¹¹⁴

Though it is also about democratic practices and the election process, this passage is also noteworthy for its *wariness* and its plea for colonists to remain wary—to take their role as electors seriously in order to choose representatives who seem most committed to the public good.

From early on, then, during and even before the period in which some historians have argued Adams was most egalitarian, he was deeply worried about corruption in human nature and never so democratic as some historians suggest. Only with a tripartite

¹¹² Ibid., 481-2.

¹¹³ Adams advocated that the people elect the lower house, which would, in turn, choose the members of the upper house, and that both houses choose the executive.

¹¹⁴ "On Self-Delusion," *Boston Gazette*, August 29, 1763. (*Works* III: 437).

legislative structure, he would argue, could freedom be preserved and corruption limited. The powerful and independent executive was an indispensable part of this.

If Adams's devotion to the uncorrupted constitutional forms of Great Britain makes him a conservative, then he was a conservative from the beginning of his public career. This very adamant and very specific inclination was, as discussed in the previous chapter, influenced by his dark view of human nature, which derived from his Puritan heritage and his close study of governmental forms throughout history. Though accusations against Adams and his apparent affection for monarchy became notable only in the 1780s and 90s—especially with the publications of *Discourses on Davila* and *Defence of the Constitutions*—his ideas about the necessity of two houses, an independent judiciary, and, most important, a powerful executive branch, were pillars of his political philosophy that can be traced back, again, to even his pre-public, pre-revolutionary years.

There is no way to ignore the shift in *focus* from Adams's early works to his later years; those who argue that he changed in his fundamental political thought emphasize this change in focus—from simply outlining constitutional systems in his writing to emphasizing the connection between human nature and the institutions—as an indication that Adams became less republican and more conservative, even monarchical. However, it is possible to reconcile these two periods. When we do, we see the same fundamental philosophic principles and their relation to his theory of politics and government throughout his life. Examining a number of his major publications, as well as lesser-known sources, we see that Adams remained devoted to the “fight against innovation,”¹¹⁵ against a major change in the governmental structure inherited from Great Britain,

¹¹⁵ Timothy H. Breen, "John Adams' Fight against Innovation in the New England Constitution: 1776," *The New England Quarterly* 40 (1967).

because of his views on human nature. He did not simply react to different events in the manner he saw appropriate; if this ideal governmental system was challenged, he publically and privately railed against its opponents, using the same arguments throughout his life. And while it may seem inconceivable that an unequivocally adamant supporter for the American Revolution could, within twenty years, condemn the French Revolution, this was not simply a new reaction to a novel threat. It was impassioned opposition to a familiar foe.

Though Gordon Wood asserts that Adams's greatest intellectual shortcoming was his failure to leave behind Old World preoccupations, like the necessity of a powerful executive, Adams was adamant about his political ideas because he was nobly committed to liberty and, less-often emphasized, republicanism. His commitment to the constitutional form of Great Britain, though certainly a monarchical system, reflects this. His most complex and most controversial ideas concerned the definition of a republic and how it related to monarchy. Adams was fully invested in the notion that the most perfect system of government, the government of Great Britain, was not a simple monarchy, but instead a republican monarchy. Because his ideas about monarchy are central to the question of change versus continuity in his political thought, I will devote the next chapter to a close analysis of those ideas.

Chapter 4: The King and the President

In previous chapters I have argued that the principles of Adams's political philosophy—what he advocated and what he condemned—that change theorists have forwarded as evidence for a transformation between the 1770s and the late 1780s and 90s can actually be found in his writing from *all* periods. His beliefs about the “negative” passions—competitiveness, self-interest, vanity—can be traced both backward, to the Puritan religious culture of his youth, and forward, into his political writings of every decade. These writings convey his belief that the thirst for power and social elevation caused by these passions will always produce a hierarchy involving (at least) two kinds of people—commoners and an aristocracy. And, as discussed in the previous chapter, only a governmental system that has specific places for each category—and a powerful executive to mediate between them—can prevent one group from dominating the other.

In this chapter, I focus on Adam's understanding of the executive, for it is these ideas that were most often cited by his opponents as evidence that he had turned into a monarchist, and are also cited by historians claiming that only later in life did Adams favor Old World political models. I believe that, here too, Adams's views were consistent throughout his career.

A number of striking passages in Adams's earlier work, discussed below, express an appreciation of and even endorsement of monarchy within a government of mixed composition. Though this early evidence, from the 1760s and 1770s, supporting Adams's belief in a strong executive is less abundant than his writing on the importance of mixed government, the few places in which he does address the subjects of both republicanism and monarchy, which date back to this so-called republican or radical

period, are salient. Adams was well aware that most colonists would not accept an American hereditary monarchy in either the 1770s *or* the 1790s. Adams would not have, either, though his enemies made this charge. What he spoke of in a number of private writings, even early in his adult life, reveals an important call for what he would have deemed republicanism *through* monarchy, or, what Richard Alan Ryerson, former editor in chief of the Adams papers at the Massachusetts Historical Society, would call republican monarchy. This was Adams's ideal government, from the time in which he first began to consider political structures, and this is the ideal he worked to implement in the new American states and nation.

To understand Adams's vision for the American executive, we will turn to his "conservative" works of the 1790s and move backwards, towards his pertinent earlier writing, published and unpublished, from the years surrounding the American Revolution. Through this process we will both establish consistency of thought and also further clarify the details of his ideal governmental structure. Finally, we can hypothesize about what unstated beliefs lay behind Adams's strong argument for an independent executive.

Though Adams had a habit of creating adversaries because of the adamancy and stubbornness with which he pushed his views, public opposition to Adams's ideas came most passionately in the 1790s, after the publication of *Defence* and then *Davila* a few years later. It was not only these works that earned Adams the animosity of many of his countrymen. This was a period of bitter political debate in America, with the events in France contributing to the polarization of political parties between Federalists and Jeffersonians (Democratic-Republicans). Opponents hurled the terms "Jacobin" and

“Monarchist” at each other, depending on whether they approved of or condemned the French Revolution.¹¹⁶

Still, it was the arguments in *Defence* that provided ammunition for those who accused Adams of favoring monarchy. What prompted Adams to write it was apparently a letter by the French political philosopher and political figure Turgot. Written in 1778, it was posthumously published in 1784, appended to Richard Price’s *Observations on the Importance of the American Revolution*. The essence of Turgot’s critique of the American constitutions, which many states had adopted using Adams’s *Thoughts on Government* as a model, was as follows:

I am not satisfied, I own, with any constitutions which have as yet been framed by the different American States....I see in the greatest number an unreasonable imitation of the usages of England. Instead of bringing all the authorities into one, that of the nation, they have established different bodies, a house of representatives, a council, a governor, because England has a house of commons, a house of lords, and a king. They undertake to balance these different authorities, as if the same equilibrium of powers which has been thought necessary to balance the enormous preponderance of royalty, could be of any use in republics, formed upon the equality of all the citizens; and as if every article which constitutes different bodies, was not a source of divisions.¹¹⁷

Turgot’s influential attack (one which would influence the writing of both Condorcet, his disciple, and Wollstonecraft) was that the American constitutions were unnecessarily complicated and incompatible with a truly representative republic and one lacking established divisions, or estates. The simplicity of a unitary legislative assembly was the most efficient way to preserve the liberty of a nation, he and his followers would claim,

¹¹⁶ Rachel Hope Cleves, “Jacobins in this Country’’: The United States, Great Britain, and Trans-Atlantic Anti-Jacobinism,” *Early American Studies* 8 (2010): 410-45.

¹¹⁷ Translated and prepped by Charles Francis Adams to the 1851 edition of *Defence of the Constitutions of the United States of America*, published in *Works* IV: 279.

thus ensuring the happiness of the people, while also fostering republicanism and democracy.

As I have discussed at length, the divisive issue between Adams and his opponents lay in their understanding of human nature. Adams believed that human nature was immutable; only proper laws and institutions could ensure liberty and promote happiness. Turgot, on the other hand, argued that proper governmental institutions could promote egalitarian values and behavior and that in America, where societal divisions were non-existent, checks between different segments of society, and thus powers of government, were arbitrary. In a concise refutation of Turgot's assertion that Americans, under the advice of Adams, had copied Great Britain's constitutional form, Adams responded:

It was not so much because the legislature in England consisted of three branches, that such a division of power was adopted by the states, as because their own assemblies had ever been so constituted. It was not so much from attachment by habit to such a plan of power that it was continued, as from conviction that it was founded in nature and reason.¹¹⁸

Whatever republicanism his earlier works advocate never obscures Adams's certainty about men's ambition and resulting stratification. There were innumerable bases for differences in social and political influence to develop, even if they had not all arisen in colonial society, and thus proper measures—i.e. proper governmental checks and laws—had to be implemented—to both ensure liberty and promote happiness. The simplicity Turgot and many of his allies argued for, remarked Adams, would not ensure liberty. However, neither would a *simple, unchecked monarchy*, he believed, despite the

¹¹⁸ *Works* IV: 300.

accusations of his opponents. As Charles Francis Adams, who compiled the *Adams Works*, explained in his introduction to the *Defence*,

[The Defence]...furnished...an unfailing armory, from which weapons to be used against him could be drawn at pleasure by the party in political opposition. Single passages, appearing to favor monarchy or an aristocracy, were torn from the context to prove that the writer was in his heart an enemy to liberty; whilst those which looked the other way, and exposed the defects of both, were overlooked or forgotten.¹¹⁹

Because Adams wrote explicitly and at great length later in life about the benefits of a *limited* monarchy, many historians have concluded that he underwent a shift from his early years, away from radicalism and republicanism and towards monarchism and aristocracy. It is clear, though, that from his pre-revolutionary years Adams believed in republican monarchy; neither the simplicity of a government ruled by a unicameral legislative body nor an executive without the check of two branches could prevent dominant factions (or a tyrannical head) from reducing the people to slavery.

Adams's marginal comments on Wollstonecraft's *Historical and Moral View* are another source of insight into his mature political thought. Her work is laden with anti-monarchical sentiment. However, though she argues for the eventual removal of the executive's veto over the legislative chamber, and even suggests an eventual elimination of the crown altogether, she acknowledges the necessity of a temporary monarch with an ephemeral negative. Despite this concession, her belief in the benefit of eventual rule by a unicameral assembly set Adams aflame. She writes,

Thus it happened in France, that Hume's idea of a perfect commonwealth, the adoption of which would be eligible only when civilization has arrived at a much greater degree of perfection...was nevertheless chosen as the

¹¹⁹ Editor's introduction to *Defence* (Works IV: 276).

model of their new government, with a few exceptions, by the constituent assembly: which choice doubtless proceeded from the members not having had an opportunity to acquire a knowledge of practical liberty. Some of the members, it is true, alluded to the improvements made by the americans on the plan of the english constitution; but the great majority, despising experience, were for forming, at once, a system much more perfect.¹²⁰

Though she acknowledges the rashness with which the ill-prepared and uncultivated French adopted “Hume’s commonwealth” and the anarchy that premature adoption had produced in the first year of the revolution, she chides those who reject the political theory of simple government based on the failures in France.

...If the attempt to carry prematurely into execution the sublime theory, which has occupied some of the best heads to form, have afforded an opportunity to superficial politicians, to condemn it as absurd and chimerical, because it has not been attended with immediate success, the advocates for the extension of truth and reason ought not to despair. For when we contemplate the slow improvement, that has been made in the science of government; and, that even the system of the british constitution was considered, by some of the most enlightened ancients, as the sublimest theory the human mind was able to conceive, though not reducible to practice, they should not relax in their endeavours to bring to maturity a polity more simple—which promises more equal freedom, and general happiness to mankind.¹²¹

Adams comments at length:

It promised precisely what it performed, universal ruin. Devastation and massacre. Such was the equal freedom and general happiness it promised and produced! The clock would be more simple if you destroyed all the wheels and left only the weights or the spring, but it would not tell the time of day.... The solar system would be more simple if all the planets were destroyed and you left only the sun. The universe would be more simple if it were all in one globe. The earth would be more simple if it were all fire, water, air, or earth, but its inhabitants must perish in either case.... It is silly to be eternally harping upon simplicity in a form of

¹²⁰ Mary Wollstonecraft, *An Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution and the Effect it Has Produced in Europe* (London: J. Johnson, 1795), 357.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 357-8.

government. The simplest of all possible governments is a despotism in one....Simplicity is not the *summum bonum*.¹²²

Of the claim that many Americans had adopted an improved form of the British constitution, Adams reveals his sensitivity to the rejection of his constitution, modeled on that of England, by some of the states two decades prior, remarking caustically,

What Americans? Not Franklin, for they adopted [Hume's] system. Not the first Constitution of Pennsylvania, for they adopted it. Not the Constitution of Massachusetts, New York, or the United States, for they rejected them all for Franklin's, Turgot's, i.e. Needham's. Servile idolatry of Franklin, which was the true source, is called self-sufficiency.¹²³

Though this rebuke evinces Adams's vanity and lasting resentment at French reverence for Benjamin Franklin and his ideas,¹²⁴ it is more significant for its anger at the rejection of the constitution, outlined in *Thoughts on Government*, based on the perfect balance of powers he saw in the theoretical constitution of England. Of the latter, the most important feature would be the mix between the democratic element, represented by a lower house, chosen by the people at large, the aristocratic element, in a senate, and an executive head, who though not totally immune from the influence of these houses, would be kept strong through a negative on their laws—the veto. Against Wollstonecraft's assertion that Mirabeau, president of the Constituent National Assembly, had “contended for the infallibility of the king” and created “a pious fraud,”¹²⁵ Adams's rebuke:

Mirabeau probably intended to introduce an hereditary senate between the King and the popular assembly...No infallibility is implied in the maxim and Mirabeau had more sense than Miss Wollstonecraft. The maxim

¹²² Ibid., 358.

¹²³ Ibid., 357.

¹²⁴ “Mr. Turgot, the Duke de la Rochefoucauld, and Mr. Condorcet and others, admired Mr. Franklin's Constitution and reprobated mine.” (*Works IX*: 623).

¹²⁵ Wollstonecraft, *Historical and Moral View*, 408.

means no more than that the laws will not impute blame to the King but to his ministers because he can do nothing but by ministers. This policy is for the safety of the people.¹²⁶

While Adams refutes Wollstonecraft's claim about Mirabeau's intentions (an understandable defense, as Mirabeau sympathized with the limited monarchy of Great Britain), he himself then acknowledges the importance of the king's invulnerability against, *especially*, a *single* legislative assembly. The king, when properly balanced against a bicameral legislature, must have the power of the veto over the other two components--"provisions versus the abuse of the legislative part are equally necessary. The efficiency of the executive cannot be derived but by its independence and its independence cannot be maintained without a negative."¹²⁷ Of the danger of combining a singular assembly and an executive not above the law, Adams contended,

the supreme head of the executive of a great nation must be inviolable or the laws will never be executed. If such heads are liable to civil actions and criminal persecutions and impeachments the government will easily be ruined. The absurdity consisted in establishing an hereditary executive as a balance to a vast legislature in one National Assembly. You might as well constitute an army to determine every movement by a vote of an 100,000 men and give the General a veto upon each vote. A gladiator in a pit without arms to defend himself against an hundred lions.¹²⁸

The importance of the veto in Adam's prescription for a proper system was based on his idealized understanding of the British monarchy, even before the system was thought by him and others to have been "corrupted." Although it is true that the monarch had, in theory, an absolute veto over laws passed by the Parliament, it was in fact no longer being used by the start of the eighteenth century. This may have reflected the

¹²⁶ HMV marginalia, 408.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 346.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 407.

increasing power of the parliament in both foreign and domestic affairs, another difference between the ideal system, in which only the crown was in charge of foreign policy, and historical reality.¹²⁹

Adams's critics ignored a crucial distinction he consistently made in all of his work between a simple or absolute monarchy and a republican monarchy. In *Defence* he discusses the republican nature of a limited monarchy, here termed a "free state":

It is become a kind of fashion among writers, to admit, as a maxim, that if you could be always sure of a wise, active, and virtuous prince, monarchy would be the best of governments. But this is so far from being admissible, that it will forever remain true, that a free government has a great advantage over a simple monarchy. The best and wisest prince, by means of a freer communication with his people, and the greater opportunities to collect the best advice from the best of his subjects, would have an immense advantage in a free state over a monarchy. A senate consisting of all that is most noble, wealthy, and able in the nation, with a right to counsel the crown at all times, is a check to ministers, and a security against abuses.... Another assembly, composed of representatives chosen by the people in all parts, gives free access to the whole nation, and communicates all its wants, knowledge, projects, and wishes to government; ... it gives a universal energy to the human character, in every part of the state, such as never can be obtained in a monarchy.¹³⁰

In a 1789 letter to Roger Sherman, Adams provides a very clear distillation of his thinking about the relationship between a republic and a monarchy. It is a succinct summary of so much of his philosophy of government in the later period that it bears quoting at length:

In my letter of yesterday I think it was demonstrated that the English government is a republic, and that the regal negative upon the laws is essential to that republic...Let us now inquire, whether the new constitution of the United States is or is not a monarchical republic, like that of Great Britain. The monarchical and the aristocratical power in our

¹²⁹ William E. Scheuerman, "American Kingship? Monarchical Origins of Modern Presidentialism," *Polity* 37 (2005): 24-53.

¹³⁰ *Defence* (*Works* IV: 288-9).

constitution, it is true, are not hereditary; but this makes no difference in the nature of the power, in the nature of the balance, or in the name of the species of government. A nation...might create a simple monarchy for years, life, or perpetuity, and in either case the creature would be equally a simple monarch during the continuance of his power. So the people of England might create king, lords, and commons, for a year, or for several years, or for life, and in any of these cases, their government would be a monarchical republic, or, if you will, a limited monarchy, during its continuance, as much as it is now, when the king and nobles are hereditary. They might make their house of commons hereditary too...but it would not in the first moment make any change in the...name of the government.

Let us now consider what our constitution is, and see whether any other name can with propriety be given it, than that of a monarchical republic, or if you will, a limited monarchy. [my italics] The duration of our president is neither perpetual nor for life; it is only for four years; but his power during those four years is much greater than that of an avoyer, a consul, a podestà, a doge, a stadtholder; nay, than a king of Poland; nay, than a king of Sparta. I know of no first magistrate in any republican government, excepting England and Neuchatel, who possesses a constitutional dignity, authority, and power comparable to his....

That these powers are necessary, I readily admit. That the laws cannot be executed without them; that the lives, liberties, properties and characters of the citizens cannot be secure without their protection, is most clear. But it is equally certain, I think, that they ought to have been still greater, or much less. The limitations upon them in the cases of war, treaties, and appointments to office, and especially the limitation on the president's independence as a branch of the legislative, will be the destruction of this constitution, and involve us in anarchy, if not amended. ...[Every form of monarchical republic] has been found to be no better than committing the lamb to the custody of the wolf, except that one which is called a *balance of power*. A simple sovereignty in one, a few, or many, has no balance.... A divided sovereignty without a balance, or in other words, where the division is unequal, is always at war.... In our constitution the sovereignty,—that is, the legislative power,—is divided into three branches. The house and senate are equal, but the third branch, though essential, is not equal. The president must pass judgment upon every law; but in some cases his judgment may be overruled. These cases will be such as attack his constitutional power; it is, therefore, certain he has not equal power to defend himself, or the constitution, or the judicial power, as the senate and house have.

Power naturally grows. Why? Because human passions are insatiable. The legislative power, in our constitution, is greater than the executive; it will, therefore, encroach, because both aristocratical and democratical passions are insatiable. The legislative power will increase, the executive will diminish. In the legislature, the monarchical power is not equal either

to the aristocratical or democratical; it will, therefore, decrease, while the other will increase. *Indeed, I think the aristocratical power is greater than either the monarchical or democratical. That will, therefore, swallow up the other two.*¹³¹ [my italics]

Just as a unicameral body would ultimately lead to destruction, so would an absolute monarchy. But for a republican monarchy to work, the executive had to be both independent and powerful. And here Adams even declares that the weakness of the American executive, lacking an absolute, irreversible veto, would eventually prove fatal. Adams's fear of this outcome, expressed in numerous dramatic metaphors--the "gladiator" king, surrounded by lions, the lamb king in the hands of the wolf, Daniel in the lion's den, a hare before the hunters (below)--is striking. The king, the essential third check on the two legislative branches, could only survive with a protective veto.

Adams's insistence on a powerful executive was well known by Appleby, Howe, and Wood, who all have asserted that Adams had become increasingly wary of republicanism and distinctly more conservative later in life. His crucial distinction between an absolute and a limited monarchy, however, went ignored by his contemporary critics and has also been insufficiently considered by the scholars who have argued for his abandonment of republicanism in the 1780s. Moreover, their analyses overlook evidence for the same beliefs--the efficiency of a mixed government and of a powerful executive at its head--in Adams's earlier years, just as was true of the evidence for early belief in the superiority of balanced government.

In a letter to Elbridge Gerry in November 1779, Adams speaks of his disappointment with certain changes the drafting committee made to his original draft of the Massachusetts Constitution. Though it is impossible to be sure exactly what his draft

¹³¹ July 18, 1789. (*Works* VI: 429-31).

contained, because no “manuscript copy, rough outline, or even fragmentary notes of his work have survived,”¹³² his letter gives us a good indication about the nature of the changes and of Adams’s disappointment:

I am clear for three branches in the legislature, and the committee have reported as much, though awkwardly expressed ... [My opinions] have been received with candor, but perhaps will not be adopted. In such a State as this,...I am persuaded we never shall have any stability, dignity, decision, or liberty without it. 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, and, indeed, there is too much reason to fear, with it. The executive, which ought to be the reservoir of wisdom, as the legislative is of liberty, without this weapon of defence, will be run down like a hare before the hunters.¹³³

The "it" to which Adams refers is an absolute veto for the executive, and the “three branches” refers to his belief that the executive should be deeply involved in legislation. The executive is “the reservoir of wisdom,” essential in the preservation of liberty in the face of threats to liberty from, on the one hand, those of no or little education and, on the other, the well-educated, well-born, and more influential. However, what seems clear from both this letter, from 1779, and the one to Sherman ten years later is that although his theoretical concern, expressed in all of his published work on government, is an executive powerful enough to balance the threats from both "below" and "above," he is most troubled by the potential for the *aristocracy*—“the rich, the well-born, and the able”—to take over the government. And in this, he shows himself to be a very different kind of "conservative" than most. As Ryerson observes, "the enemy to public order that John Adams feared...was not 'the many,' the democratic mass dreaded

¹³² Richard Alan Ryerson, "Like a Hare before the Hunters': John Adams and the Idea of Republican Monarchy," *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society* 107 (1995): 20-21.

¹³³ Letter to Elbridge Gerry, November 4, 1779. (Works IX: 506).

by most eighteenth-century conservatives, but the aristocratic 'few.'¹³⁴ This interpretation is strengthened by a comment from Theophilus Parsons to Francis Dana in 1780 that Adams had insisted on an absolute veto for the governor to prevent the people from suffering domination by the aristocratic part of the legislature.¹³⁵

Earlier still is the series of essays published in the *Boston Gazette* in 1775, under the authorship of "Novanglus." These essays, often cited for their republican spirit and strongly pro-independence sentiment, provide more insight into Adams's vision of the executive in a republic,

If Aristotle, Livy, and Harrington knew what a republic was, the British constitution is much more like a republic than an empire. They define a republic to be a government of laws, and not of men. If this definition is just, the British constitution is nothing more or less than a republic, in which the king is first magistrate. This office being hereditary, and being possessed of such ample and splendid prerogatives, is no objection to the government's being a republic, as long as it is bound by fixed laws, which the people have a voice in making, and a right to defend.¹³⁶

This characterization of the British constitution would probably not surprise anyone familiar with the general American acceptance of monarchy as the ideal form of government, even in the years of war against Britain. Still, the change theorists have neglected this aspect of Adams's early political thought, thus underplaying his early endorsement of limited monarchy.

And ten years earlier, in the 1765 exchange in the *Boston Evening Post*, discussed in the previous chapter, between Adams, writing as the Earl of Clarendon, and a Tory

¹³⁴ Ryerson, "Like a Hare Before the Hunters," 23.

¹³⁵ Letter described in Stephen Kurtz, review of *The Changing Political Thought of John Adams*. *William and Mary Quarterly* 24: 131-133.

¹³⁶ *Novanglus* VII, March 6, 1775. (*Works* IV:106).

opponent writing as William Pym, Adams had articulated the idea of a republican monarchy as the ideal system.

Were I to define the British constitution...I should say, it is a limited monarchy, or a mixture of the three forms of government commonly known in the schools, reserving as much of the monarchial splendor, the aristocratical independency, and the democratical freedom, as are necessary, that each of these powers may have a controul both in legislation and execution, over the other two, for the preservation of the subject's liberty.¹³⁷

Thus, when Adams wrote in 1776, "no good government but what is republican... the very definition of a republic is 'an empire of laws, and not of men,'"¹³⁸ he was not dismissing the prospect of a limited monarchy, that is, a strong executive, in America, despite his strong commitment to republican government. In fact, Adams believed the executive *had* to be both independent *and* deeply implanted in the legislative process—to prevent the lower and upper houses of congress from domination by the other, leading to political dominance by one faction of society. Adams's generous interpretation of republican government—"a government whose sovereignty is vested in more than one person"¹³⁹--allowed him to smoothly combine limited monarchy and republicanism. He was of course more careful, less explicit, with his advocacy of limited monarchy in the 1770s, as colonists were being urged to take up arms against Great Britain, but private correspondence and various passages from published early work reveal that Adams's regard for the institution was no less, and no more, in those years than in his allegedly conservative period.

¹³⁷ *Boston Gazette*, January 27, 1766. (*Works* III: 477-480).

¹³⁸ *Thoughts on Government* January, 1776. (*Works* IV: 194).

¹³⁹ Letter to Roger Sherman, July 17, 1789. (*Works* VI:428).

In the previous chapter, I argued that Adams’s beliefs about balancing different segments of society with a mixed government could be found in his earlier as well as later work *and* that those ideas were actually not uncommon even in the early period—the 1770s. I believe that the same criticism can be made of the change theorists regarding Adams’s ideas in the *later* period, especially about monarchy, i.e., that these scholars exaggerate the extent to which his ideas differed from other political thinkers. It is important to appreciate that the idea that the American executive should be modeled on the British monarch was something “in the air” during and after the American Revolution and that this idea was incorporated into the Constitution. The American presidency ended up being at least as powerful as the British monarch. As Frank Prochaska states it, “The Founding Fathers were more monarchical in their assumptions than is widely believed. They created a veiled monarchy in the United States, giving presidents quasi-regal status and the trappings of royalty.”¹⁴⁰ Gordon Wood makes a similar observation:

Once Washington was elected, many people, including Jefferson, expected that he might be president for life, that he would be a kind of elective monarch, something not out of the question in the eighteenth century.... Many Americans in the 1790s took seriously the prospect of some sort of monarchy developing in America. Although America becoming a monarchy might seem absurd, in 1789 it did not seem so at all. After all, Americans had been raised as subjects of monarchy and, in the opinion of some, still seemed emotionally to value the hereditary attributes of monarchy.¹⁴¹

In the Constitutional Convention of 1787, Benjamin Franklin observed, “There is a natural inclination in mankind to Kingly Government. It sometimes relieves them from Aristocratic domination. They had rather have one tyrant than five hundred. It gives

¹⁴⁰ Frank Prochaska, *The Eagle and the Crown: Americans and the British Monarchy*. (Yale University Press, 2008), xii.

¹⁴¹ Gordon S. Wood, *Empire of Liberty: A History of the Early Republic, 1789-1815*. (Oxford University Press, 2009), 74.

more the appearance of equality among Citizens, and that they like.”¹⁴² Franklin seems wary of this tendency, although he admits that a king can protect the common people from domination by an aristocracy. Alexander Hamilton, at the same Convention, seems more certain about the advantages of a monarchy, and even argues that the hereditary English monarchy is the “only good” model¹⁴³ for an executive. In his notes for his speeches at the Convention, he goes so far as to say that “the monarch must have proportional strength. He ought to be hereditary, and to have so much power, that it will not be his interest to risk much to acquire more.”¹⁴⁴ However, in his actual address, he only advocated that the executive (and senators) serve during “good behavior,” i.e., for life, and that he (like senators), should be elected, but not directly, i.e., by the whole population. And, like Adams, he asserted that the executive should have an absolute veto.

Neither Hamilton nor any of the other Founding Fathers wanted to recreate the British monarchy exactly, for America was to be a republic, after all. But most felt that the executive should be as much like a king as possible while staying within republican principles. And this included all of the rituals and solemnity of royalty. George Washington understood this, which is why when he appeared in public, bands sometimes played “God Save the King,” and in his speeches, he even referred to himself in the third person.¹⁴⁵ It was decided that, like a king, he should be difficult to approach, and should make himself available only through a limited number of “levees,” or audiences. The

¹⁴² Speech to the Constitutional Convention. <http://www.bartleby.com/268/8/12.html>

¹⁴³ *The Works of Alexander Hamilton*, vol 1, ed. Henry Cabot Lodge (G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1904), 390.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 374.

¹⁴⁵ Wood, *Empire of Liberty*, 77.

formality of these seems almost comical by today's standards, but it reflects the degree to which the presidency was designed with monarchy in mind.

His formal levees, complete with silver buckles and powdered hair, were painful affairs for everyone. These receptions, held at first on Tuesday and Friday afternoons and later on only Tuesdays, were an opportunity for prominent men to meet the president. The invited guests, all men, entered the president's residence at three o'clock, where they found the president standing before the fireplace. Fifteen minutes were allowed for the guests to assemble in a circle. As each guest entered the room he walked to the President, bowed, and without speaking backed to his place in the circle. The only voice heard was that of a presidential aide softly announcing the names. Promptly on the quarter hour the doors were shut; the President then walked around the circle, addressed each man by name, and made some brief remark to him. He bowed but never shook hands. Washington thought that hand-shaking was much too familiar for the president to engage in; consequently he kept one hand occupied holding a fake hat and the other resting on his dress sword. When the president had rounded the circle, he returned to the fireplace and stood until, at a signal from an aide, each guest one by one went to him, bowed without saying anything, and left the room. However excruciatingly formal these levees were, Washington thought they would continue. He thus designed the bowed shape of the Blue Room to accommodate them.¹⁴⁶

Just as it was decided that the president should be generally unavailable, many of the Founders felt that he should have a title that reflected something like kingly stature. This issue took up much of the Senate's time in its first month, with John Adams, who believed in the importance of symbols of distinction, very active in the discussion. He suggested "His Highness" and "His Most Benign Highness," while others favored "Excellency," "Highness," "Elective Highness," among many others. Washington himself was said to prefer "His High Mightiness, the President of the United States and Protector of Their Liberties." The Senate Titles Committee eventually suggested "His

¹⁴⁶ Gordon S. Wood, "The Greatness of George Washington," *Virginia Quarterly Review*, Spring 1992, pp. 189-207. <http://www.vqronline.org/articles/1992/spring/wood-greatness-george-washington/>

Highness the President of the United States of America, and Protector of their Liberties” but in the end, of course, “President of the United States” was chosen.¹⁴⁷

As amusing as these concerns may seem, the underlying issue was crucial. As Wood points out, “by creating a single strong president, the new federal Constitution had undoubtedly moved America back toward the abandoned English monarchy.”¹⁴⁸ In fact, the American president was at least as “strong” as the British king, and arguably stronger. Some of the powers Hamilton argued for in the speech quoted above are part of the modern American presidency. He is indirectly elected (through the electoral college), has veto power, and has the power to pardon. Although his appointees (judges, cabinet members, ambassadors, etc.) have to be approved by the Senate (something that Adams objected to), he has the power to remove them at will. And, until the Twenty-second Amendment in 1947, he had the possibility to be reelected an unlimited number of times. In short, it is ironic that the American president ended up with powers and prerogatives that were greater than those of George III, the “despot” against whom the colonists rebelled.¹⁴⁹

What can be said about Adams is that he was not the conservative outlier that some have claimed him to be. It is more correct to say that he was more explicit, persistent, and scholarly in advocating for an executive, whether in America or abroad, who was independent and powerful, an idea that was "in the air" both during the revolution and in the decades afterwards.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Wood, *Empire of Liberty*, 85.

¹⁴⁹ Prochaska, *Eagle and the Crown*; Scheuerman, “American Kingship.”

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Adams's political philosophy is unusual in its complexity. Though it was not radically innovative, because he was deeply influenced by the "constitution" of England, it was thoroughly informed by his vision of man's nature—a combination of the rational and the passionate. We have seen its nuances, some subtleties expressed more avidly at certain points in his life than at other times, and its pillars, which bent little from the American Revolution to the French Revolution. And, most prominent, we have seen that the latter were based on an understanding of man's nature rooted in the Puritan culture of the Massachusetts colony.

There are still questions to be answered. In the details of his early conjectures on the universality of sinfulness and the structures of government essential in curtailing unchecked ambition lies a baffling and important issue. We now know that Adams believed in the necessity of an active, powerful executive to check the actions of the bicameral legislative body. Though he became most bold and explicit about this when he felt social and political circumstance demanded, his vision of mixed government was developed in his formative years as a revolutionary. In his large body of writings, though, both published and unpublished, Adams rarely addressed the issue of the monarch or executive's ability to evade the sins inherent in mankind: the passion to dominate his fellow man and to control and accumulate power. In other words, if man is naturally inclined to self-interest and domination of others, what would prevent the executive from abusing his power?

Though Adams had been concerned, we have now seen, with threats to the ability of the executive to carry out his functions without a protective negative and, more

generally, threats to one or the other component of government by another without a proper balance, we find two perplexing details in his thinking which seem to contradict this concern. The first, distinct from but related to the importance of the powerful executive, is Adams's curious suggestion in *Thoughts* that the executive head would be chosen by the two houses, and that the "middle chamber," was to be chosen by the lower house. That is, the House of Representatives, as it would eventually be called, would choose the Senate, and of course, as in any good republic, the Representatives would be chosen by the people at large. With this flow of power--from the people at large, to the elected representatives of the lower house, to the senate, chosen by these representatives, to the president--the complexity of the division seem arbitrary. If the monarch, or executive, the position Adams felt would be instrumental in maintaining liberty, was only a higher order representation of the people's general will, then all power was essentially still in the hands of the people at large. All components--the legislative, with its two chambers, and the executive, so essential in curtailing the whims of the two lower branches--are essentially all elected from the same source, with no distinguishing factors among the three.

Thus, based on this early outline for government, these divisions, a direct homage to the divisions in the English constitution, which Adams and many of his contemporaries acclaimed, were arbitrary, but only *if there was no hierarchical social structure in America at the time of the Revolution*. Bernard Bailyn addresses this issue astutely. On the specifics of Adams's pamphlet, he writes,

The proposal was necessarily conjectural—alternative possibilities were suggested throughout—and it was crowded with ambiguities and paradoxes. What was there in the character of the middle branch—the second assembly—that distinguished its members from the population in

general? What did it represent? How could it retain its independence if it were elected annually by a body extremely sensitive to public opinion? Its similarities to the middle bodies of the governments were superficial, for it could not be thought of as embodying a separate order or interest in a society that consisted of only one order....what was clear throughout, however, was that Adams was seeking to perpetuate that “balance between...contending powers” that had been the glory of England’s uncorrupted constitution.¹⁵⁰

There are a number of problems in Bailyn’s analysis of the constitutional debate of Adams’s era—the same basic argument made by historians whose analysis became collectively known as the “Republican Synthesis”—that warrant attention. In answer to the fundamental question above Bailyn and his peers contended that in America, the need to balance the Old World’s social orders became simply a need to balance “contending powers” or governmental structures. Bailyn and those who wrote in the same analytical vein, including Gordon Wood, argued that a number of fundamental and radical changes had taken place in the social thought of the American colonists during the years immediately before, during, and after the Revolution. The colonists, including men like Adams, and Jefferson, no longer attributed the “balance” in government to a “balance” between different factions of society. It was now an intra-governmental balance.

From his study of history and society, Adams felt that social and economic stratification, based on the many bases for distinctions, would develop in every society, and, logically, so too would classes and factions. *This* is why he provided these outlines in *Thoughts on Government*, in the constitution of Massachusetts, and in every piece of political writing until his death. It was this belief that was most influential in his political thinking, and it informed his thought and actions from the American Revolution to that of

¹⁵⁰ Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Harvard University Press, 1967), 291.

the French two decades later. He did not simply believe in a balance between “governmental structures”—a rather empty notion, anyway; what is clear from *Thoughts on Government* is that the members of each part of government, though chosen, ideally, by merit, were a derivative of different segments of the people at large. Bailyn attempted to answer this question, writing,

The idea that constitutional liberty was bound up with the mediating political power of a privileged social order persisted into the turmoil of the Revolutionary crisis, *but it came under new pressures and was challenged by the more advanced thinkers of the time...*In a society where “no distinction of ranks existed...and none were entitled to any rights but such as were common to all,” and where the government could by definition express only the will of “the democracy” could the liberty-saving balance be preserved? What, indeed were the elements to be balanced, and by what organs of government should their interests be expressed?¹⁵¹ (my italics)

He asks the same questions John Adams’s peers asked themselves. Adams did not struggle with the answer: it is implicit in the government outlined in *Thoughts on Government*, a clear reflection of the necessity of balancing what he felt were not “Old World” social structures but inevitably universal ones. If they were not based on familial ties, they would result from varying levels of ambition. Even if America did not see the same hereditary elite that Great Britain did, a natural aristocracy would always emerge. If elites did not dominate government, the people at large would. The only possible mediator between factions in society, contended Adams, was the executive.

In analyzing his vision of the executive, though, we find an equally puzzling question: What would prevent the executive from abusing his power? Charles Francis Adams, editor of *Works*, addressed this issue directly and in detail.

¹⁵¹ Bailyn, *Ideological Origins*, 280-285.

... it is not easy to put the finger upon any clause of the constitution which can prevent an evil-disposed president for four years from using the powers vested in him in what way he pleases, without regard to the people's wishes at all. Indeed, it is possible to go a step further, and to venture a doubt whether an adequate restraint can be found against the corrupt as well as despotic use of his authority,—the sale of his patronage, as well as the perversion of his policy. The only tangible remedy,—that by impeachment,—is obviously insufficient, from the absence of all motive to wield a ponderous system of investigation after the offender has lost his power, and when he is no longer of consequence to the state. Of the sluggish nature of this process, experience in cases of inferior magnitude has already furnished enough proof. The evidence necessary to convict an offender would not be likely to accumulate until a large part of his four years of service had expired; and the remainder would probably elapse before it could be obtained. Then would come the election of a successor, with a system in no wise responsible for that which preceded it, and around which new interests would immediately concentrate. What probability is there of the ultimate infliction upon the guilty man, now become a private individual, removed from observation, of any penalty adequate to his crime? But if this reasoning, as to the absence of responsibility, be only partially true, it becomes perfectly plain that, at least in the case of a president confining himself to the use of his legitimate powers in office, however unpalatable that may be, there can be little of sovereignty exercised by the people during his term.¹⁵²

One of the more popular solutions to this compelling question, one which thinkers of Adams's era struggled with as they attempted to create more perfect governments, is that the honor of having been *elected* would serve as a compelling and essential constraint for a politician. In other words, it is the elective process that should insure good behavior by the executive and therefore secure a nation's protection against a tyrannical leader.

If he is *annually elective*, as he ought to be, he will always have so much reverence and affection for the people, their representatives and counsellors, that, although you give him an independent exercise of his

¹⁵² Charles Francis Adams, Editors Preface to Vol VI of *Works*, 407.

judgment, he will seldom use it in opposition to the two houses, except in cases the public utility of which would be conspicuous....¹⁵³

And indeed, in *Thoughts on Government*, Adams explained that if the president's term is limited, and he is subject to re-election, he would not dare do things that oppose the interest of the people. He would *in theory* be elected based on merit, and would maintain allegiance to the people, using his wisdom to mediate between the opposing factions of society, as represented by the lower and upper house of Congress. We've seen, though, that Adams was not as confident in the elective process as he may have publically appeared, especially during this phase in American history. Thus, I think he hoped for something that went beyond ordinary merit; ideally, a president would represent the top tier of intellect and morality, and these traits would allow him to rule with a selfless hand. Alexander Hamilton, often associated with the same conservative philosophy change theorists associate with an older Adams, expressed his concern with the elective process at the Constitutional Convention of 1787, as I pointed out in the previous chapter, writing in the notes for his speech, "The monarch must have proportional strength. He ought to be hereditary, and to have so much power, that it will not be his interest to risk much to acquire more."¹⁵⁴ Though Adams found elections risky, because of society's fickleness and vulnerability to manipulation by demagogues, he did, at least publically, assert that it was a necessary component of any government whose goal was to promote and maintain happiness in a free society. And he had enough faith in the decisions of the people at large—an educated populace, ideally—to trust a system of election based on merit. Therefore, I don't think Adams would have ruled out the possibility of lifetime

¹⁵³ *Thoughts on Government* (*Works IV*, 197).

¹⁵⁴ *The Works of Alexander Hamilton*, vol 1, ed. Henry Cabot Lodge (G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1904), 374.

appointments for a qualified executive, as long as good behavior endured. He would not, though, have supported a hereditary king, as many of his enemies and some historians assert. This accusation undermines what I believe to be the most crucial aspect of Adams's feelings about both the monarch and executive: that they should be men of rare intelligence and generosity, that is, of *ultimate merit*. It was his own intelligence, he believed, that prevented his ambition from impeding his life of service to his country.

Whether or not Adams believed that an executive who held his position for life would be less corrupt than one who had to be reelected, Adams was not blinded by the same "Old World" naiveté many of his countrymen fell victim to. In a provocative assertion, William E. Scheuerman argues that the American executive, like the monarchs of old, is endowed by the people with extraordinary charismatic qualities, that the great powers given to the American president, argued for by Hamilton (and Adams, of course) on questionable functional grounds, were really based on old beliefs about the divinely ordained power and wisdom of the monarch.¹⁵⁵

While many in America were still captive to a naïve reverence for the monarch, this blind adulation did not affect Adams. What Adams idealized was the concept of a Platonic philosopher-king. Adams was devoted to meritocracy, yet he believed man's vanity and ambition were universal. Two historians have made compelling arguments that I believe, in combination, amount to Adams's answer to the potential for executive tyranny, which, again, would seem to be great, given the universal thirst for power. In an appropriately titled chapter, "Plato's Wish," John Patrick Diggins asserts that America, until recently, perhaps,

¹⁵⁵ William E. Scheuerman, "American Kingship? Monarchical Origins of Modern Presidentialism," *Polity* 37 (2005): 24-53.

scarcely noticed the one president who came closest to fulfilling Plato's wish to see a philosopher in power. The ancient Greek thinker insisted that a republic must be governed by the wisdom of philosophy or it may very well not be governed at all. His successor Aristotle agreed, convinced that reason could tame the passions so that citizens would know the good and leaders would do it. Adams, however, rejected the elitist "dogma of Aristotle," which privileged the chattering leisure class that gathered around the *polis* to the "tyrannical exclusion" of all others in enjoying the ranks of rights and citizenship.¹⁵⁶

It would be illogical to conjecture Adams's belief in a vast difference in the executive's nature, if we accept that he believed in universal innate corruption. However, I am not alone in suggesting that it was Adams's intelligence which informed his own presidential ideal, that of a philosopher-king, whose wisdom would allow him to rule, informed by but not dominated by the will of society, without becoming a tyrant. He believed that he, and very few others, had the ability to overcome the consequences of excessive vanity with wisdom and virtue, a belief that, I believe, also derived from his Puritan roots. As Edward Morgan argues, "In a letter to Elbridge Gerry which he never sent....Adams tried to explain why his vanity did not interfere with his public service...[he] reveals himself as a latter day master of the weapons which his Puritan forebears had perfected in two centuries of striving against vanity."¹⁵⁷ Morgan contends that an intellectual parallel can be drawn between Adams and Winthrop, his Puritan forbearer, which should now come as no surprise.

Both men originally contemplated entering the ministry but wound up in public office. Both men loved Massachusetts and served her well. Both suspected their political opponents of being evil or unpatriotic. Both were extremely sensitive to criticism and felt obliged to justify themselves at length whenever attacked. If Winthrop's goal was salvation and Adams's was fame, they both thought that diligence in serving the public was the

¹⁵⁶ John Patrick Diggins (*John Adams*, Times Books, 2003), 35.

¹⁵⁷ Edmund S. Morgan, "John Adams and the Puritan Tradition," *New England Quarterly* 34 (1961): 523.

way to reach it, and both kept diaries to help them toward it...Although Adams today is the darling of the conservatives—and there is no doubt that his temperament was more conservative than radical—the key to his political behavior is neither conservative nor radicalism but his devotion to a public interest that excluded Great Britain and widened from Massachusetts to embrace first the American colonies and then the United States.¹⁵⁸

Adams was his own ideal. He recognized his own ambitious nature, his vanity, and his drive for distinction, but he was confident in his own ability to overcome, or at least suppress, these qualities through strength of character. It was this ability, he believed, which would allow him to rule his country selflessly.

Adams was adamant about the things in which he believed. We see this in the consistency of his thought from the years surrounding the American Revolution up to his Vice-Presidency and Presidency, and in between, his reaction to the French Revolution. This stubbornness was based in his own well-placed intellectual confidence and, ultimately, in a deep commitment to what he believed to be the public good. In a perfect summary of the controversial thinker, Morgan writes, “Adams was ridiculously vain, absurdly jealous, embarrassingly hungry for compliments. But no man ever served his country more selflessly. His own self-pitying, self-righteous affirmations of this fact should not be allowed to obscure its veracity.”¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 527-528.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 522.

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