John Adams in the Continental Congress

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JOHN ADAMS IN THE CONTINENTAL CONGRESS

by

William A. Dehler, S.J.

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REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF
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VITA AUCTORIS

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CHAPTER I

THE FIRST CONTINENTAL CONGRESS

Fearing that the Royal Governor would dissolve their assembly, the members of the Massachusetts House of Representatives ordered the doors of the chamber to be locked, June 17, 1774. They had important business to transact before they adjourned. By an overwhelming majority they voted to send delegates to Philadelphia to consult with the delegates from the other colonies and to determine "wise and proper measures ... for the recovery and establishment of their just rights & liberties, civil and religious, and the restoration of union & harmony between Great Britain and the Colonies." Finally they selected five delegates to represent the colony of Massachusetts and passed a resolution to provide their expense money.

Meanwhile the Governor's Secretary had brought an order for the dissolution of the House. He did not, however, gain admittance, for the assembly confirmed by vote their previous order to keep the doors locked. In vain the Secretary published the proclamation on the stairs leading up to the chamber; the members of the House did not vote to adjourn until they had completed their work. Thus ended the last provincial assembly in Massachusetts under the royal prerogative.

One of the five delegates chosen was John Adams, a man of
thirty-eight years just rising to great prominence as a lawyer. Although he had gained considerable recognition by his formal protest against the Stamp Act before Chief Justice Hutchinson and had refused a lucrative post offered by the royal authorities as an indirect bribe, John Adams was far from being an outstanding patriot leader. With full confidence, however, Samuel Adams and Joseph Hawley had often consulted him in a legal capacity; now they decided to call him to more direct service in the cause of American liberty.

This choice was a surprise to John Adams. He had hoped to avoid public affairs. Now that he could reasonably expect his law practice to provide comfortably for his family needs, to sacrifice this professional career even for a time cost him not a little regret. A stronger reason for surprise was the consciousness of his own lack of experience. In sharp contrast to his usual vanity, John Adams confessed, "This will be an assembly of the wisest men upon the continent . . . I will feel myself unequal to this business. A more extensive knowledge of the realm, the colonies, and of commerce, as well as of law and policy, is necessary, than I am master of." He regarded the Congress as a "school" and a "nursery of American Statesmen" and regretted that he could not prepare for the forthcoming term by reading points in Law, Politics, and Commerce. If only he were not obliged to make his professional circuit through the present state of Maine during the last two months before Congress con-
vened, he could review his Law and History, and then he "might appear with less indecency before a variety of gentlemen, whose educations, travels, experience, family, fortune, and everything" gave them a vast superiority. Unfortunately, familiarity breeds contempt; this saner and truer outlook gave way to vain conceit soon after John Adams came in contact with the "wisest men upon the continent."

Not until 1774 did Adams step out of the narrow confines of New England. The ride southward to Philadelphia in the company of his colleagues, Thomas Cushing, Samuel Adams, and Robert Treat Paine, was his first opportunity "to see the world and to form acquaintances with the most eminent and famous men" in the colonies.

With the ovations tendered the delegates in Connecticut, John Adams was very much pleased. The reception at New Haven excelled in ceremony the treatment accorded a "Governor of a Province" or a "General of an Army." A large escort came out to meet them; the people crowded to the doors and windows; bells rang; and cannons boomed out a welcome. Adams properly interpreted these respectful attentions as a demonstration of sympathy for the suffering province of Massachusetts and of expectation of great results from the Congress. Thus the journey was more like a triumph than a trip to the scene of labors. For the most part the people along the route were very favorably inclined to the meeting of Congress, though Adams thought "some persons in
New York and Philadelphia wanted a little animation." After
nineteen days on the road the delegates from Massachusetts were
escorted into the city of Philadelphia to the City Tavern. During the next few days they were busy forming acquaintances
with the delegates arriving from the other colonies.

Before leaving their native province, the Bay Colony
delegates had been warned against acting in a manner likely to
hinder the unity and harmony of the Congress. The opinion was
somewhat prevalent in the other colonies that "Massachusetts gen-
tlemen ... do affect to dictate and take the lead in continen-
tal measures" and "to assume big and haughty airs." Consequently,
Joseph Hawley cautioned the delegates to act with circumspection.
Knowing well the particular propensities of John Adams, Hawley
assured him that men of equal ability would represent the other
colonies and warned him against giving "umbrage, disgust, or
affront" to members of Dutch, Scotch, or Irish descent.

Again at Frankfort, just before their arrival in Philadel-
phia, the four Massachusetts delegates received advice from Dr.
Rush, Mifflin, Bayard, and other "active sons of liberty" in
Philadelphia, who had come out to meet them. The New England
Tories had spread reports abroad that these four delegates were
"desperate adventurers" and poor men who courted popularity.
Since their native colony had felt the chastening rod of England,
the Massachusetts delegates were considered "too warm, too zeal-
ous, too sanguine" in their opposition to the Mother Country.
Consequently, Dr. Rush and his companions pointed out that under these circumstances Adams and his colleagues must surrender the honor of leading to the delegates from the Old Dominion to whom the other colonies would willingly concede first place in the Congress. John Adams confessed himself deeply impressed by this sound advice and to it, in later years, attributed the leadership of Virginians during the American Revolution.¹²

In Congress a strong prejudice against the Bostonians inclined many members to listen to their sentiments with great caution. John Adams and his colleagues were forced to keep themselves "out of sight, and to feel pulses, and to sound the depths to insinuate ... sentiments, designs, and desires, by means of other persons, sometimes of one province, and sometimes of another."¹³ Surely they had a "delicate course to steer between too much activity and too much insensibility" in the critical situation of their province at this time.¹⁴ The Bostonians were so circumspect and cautious that Caesar Rodney spoke of them as more moderate than the delegates from Virginia and the Carolinas. Even Galloway remarked that the Bostonians were very modest "in their Behavior and Conversation" yet "not so much so as not to throw out Hints."¹⁵

While John Adams found many of the members "full of prejudices and jealousies" which he had not expected, he too was prejudiced and ignorant of other colonies.¹⁶ Willingly, however, he sacrificed himself for the sake of the cause. From morning
till night, he was busy studying the characters and views of his fellow members, learning the peculiar interests of each colony, reading multitudes of pamphlets, newspapers, private letters, and visiting the leading men of the Congress.17

The Massachusetts delegates were really beggars at the Congress, desirous of sympathy and support in their resistance to Great Britain. Obviously, as beggars, they could not hope to dictate the policy of the Congress. Yet Massachusetts had definite expectations from the Congress; she desired permission to resume her charter and wanted the colonies to prepare for the armed resistance which she considered inevitable if the Mother Country did not redress colonial grievances. Such proposals startled most people outside of New England, who from a distance did not fully appreciate the difficulty of living without legislature and courts of law.18

Even before Congress convened for its first session, two parties had formed. The liberals, sympathizing with suffering Massachusetts, were prepared to support her against Great Britain; the conservatives, led by Joseph Galloway and James Duane, distrusting the radical influence of New England, desired to proceed slowly and cautiously. The first group would employ passive resistance; the conservatives sought reconciliation with England at any cost.

On Monday, September 5th, all the delegates walked from
the City Tavern to inspect Carpenters' Hall. The understanding had been that they were also to examine the State-house as a place for their meetings. But the liberals had already privately determined not to use the more suitable State-house simply because the conservative leader, Galloway, had offered it. Accordingly, even before the delegates had viewed the State-house, Thomas Lynch of South Carolina proposed that Carpenters' Hall be used. By a large majority the delegates decided in the affirmative, despite the protests of Duane, Galloway, and a few others from Pennsylvania and New York.19

The Congress unanimously chose Peyton Randolph of Virginia chairman. Then, soon after the roll call, the liberals won a second victory in the unanimous choice of Charles Thompson as Secretary of the Congress. This "unanimous" election hardly expressed the surprise and chagrin of Galloway, Jay, Duane, and their party. Galloway's determined opposition to his election was the only reason why Thompson had not been chosen as a delegate to the Congress from Pennsylvania. The choice of a man of the middle class as Secretary, however, was a move calculated to win the sympathy of and to placate the mechanics and common people of Philadelphia.20 The two reverses that Galloway's party suffered in the choice of Carpenters' Hall and of Thompson, were undoubtedly due to the influence of the Bostonians on the delegates from Virginia and Carolina.21

Despite this bit of discord, Congress continued its work
of organization by drawing up rules of conduct. Thomas Cushing proposed that the business of Congress be opened with a prayer, but Jay and Rutledge objected that the religious sentiments of the members were too diverse. Samuel Adams, however, interposed that he "could hear a prayer from a gentleman of piety and virtue, who was at the same time a friend to his country," and suggested that Reverend Mr. Duche', an Episcopal clergyman, say the opening prayer. His suggestion was followed. On the following morning the new chaplain struck out into an extemporary prayer that even delighted the heart of the non-conformist John Adams, who confessed that he had never heard a better prayer "with such fervor, such ardor, such earnestness and pathos, and in language so elegant and sublime." Very likely this praise was partly due to the motif of the prayer, for Duche' prayed especially and very appropriately for the town of Boston, which a false rumor had reported as cannonaded. Other members also lauded this pertinent extemporaneous prayer of the Reverend Duche'. Silas Deane claimed that "it was worth riding one hundred miles to hear"; Samuel Ward extolled it as one of the "most sublime, catholic, well-adapted prayers" he had ever heard. Surely the choice of Duche' was a "masterly stroke of policy" on the part of the Bostonians, who thus took care lest any religious difference prevent the harmonious union of the colonies. Though at this time Duche' was esteemed a "warm advocate of the religious and civil rights of America," three years later he turned traitor to the cause of liberty.
John Adams' impression of these first few meetings was very favorable. "Congress is such an assembly as never before came together, on a sudden, in any part of the world." Never before had he met with such "abilities, learning, eloquence, acuteness." To compare the "sordid, venal herd" of his own province with these magnanimous and public spirited men was impossible. Naturally, he cherished highly their conversation both in Congress and at the frequent banquets in the evenings.

Besides these pleasures, Adams found many difficulties in Congress, for business was tedious, "slow as snails." Fifty strangers unacquainted "with each other's language, ideas, views, designs" were naturally jealous and fearful of one another. Each colony had its own method of transacting public business; each had its own peculiar rights and interests to guard. Since unanimity was considered of prime importance, every delegate was allowed to speak on every question. Even unimportant topics were discussed minutely. Besides, the deliberations were long because each of the fifty gentlemen had been "habituated to lead and guide in his own Province." Adams, who had longed to associate with the greatest men on the continent, soon wearied of the tedious business of Congress. "This assembly is like no other that ever existed. Every man in it is a great man, an orator, a critic, a statesman; and therefore every man on every question must show his oratory, his criticism, and his political abilities."

After settling the preliminary business of procedure, Con-
grass chose several committees. One of these, composed of two members from each colony, was instructed to state the rights of the colonies, to point out violations, and to determine means of obtaining the restoration of these rights. This committee met regularly each morning for many days and thus "became an object of jealousy to all the other members of Congress." John Adams, a member of the committee, deplored that these important questions were not discussed in Congress at large. One of the mooted topics was the amount of authority to be conceded to Parliament. After fruitless discussion, the committee appointed a sub-committee, including John Adams, to draw up a set of articles. In his Autobiography Adams claimed that the key phrases in the article limiting the authority of Parliament were his work, but his memory may have failed him, for these ideas seem to have originated with Duane. Adams, however, put the articles in form and reported a fair draught for final acceptance. Though these ten resolutions on the rights and liberties of the colonies met with considerable opposition, they were passed unanimously.

One of the peaceful means of redress resolved upon in this Declaration of Rights was a non-importation, non-consumption, and non-exportation association. The colonists naturally had faith in this proposal, for history had not yet proved it ineffective. But the measure which they hoped would force England to come to terms, only hastened hostilities and emptied colonial warehouses on the very eve of the war when military supplies were most needed.
Congress' sanction of the Suffolk Resolves was a decisive victory for the liberals. In these resolves the delegates of Suffolk County, Massachusetts, desiring to resist the "unparalleled usurpation of unconstitutional power," and to preserve "those civil and religious right and liberties, for which many of our fathers fought, bled and died," had declared that the late acts of Parliament did not demand obedience because they were contrary to the natural law, the British Constitution, and the charter of Massachusetts.34 Despite the opposition of Galloway and Duane, the Suffolk Resolves were unanimously approved by a full Congress on September 17th.

John Adams considered this day one of the happiest in his life, for the "generous, noble sentiments, and manly eloquence" in Congress convinced him "that America will support Massachusetts or perish with her."35 He told his wife that the expressions of sympathy and admiration for the people of Massachusetts and the determination to support them "were enough to melt a heart of stone" and actually caused tears to "gush into the eyes of the grave pacific Quakers of Pennsylvania."36

Samuel Adams wrote that Congress had sanctioned the Suffolk Resolves, "one of which is to act merely on the defensive, so long as such conduct may be justified by reason and the principle of self-preservation, but no longer." He added that delegates from other provinces had privately assured him that their colonies would support Massachusetts if force were necessary to
defend her liberty. Clearly, the endorsement of the Suffolk Resolves was but a step in the policy of Massachusetts. The other colonies, however, had not yet advanced very far in their opposition to Great Britain. John Adams warned a friend in Massachusetts not to expect a great deal from Congress, for the delegates "start at the thought of taking up the old charter," and "shudder at the prospect of blood; yet they are unanimously and unalterably against your submission to any of the Acts for a single moment."

Thus the members wanted to straddle the fence and not commit themselves to any treasonable act. When the Massachusetts delegation represented to Congress the impossibility of living without law and government, the other members gave panegyrics on the "wisdom, fortitude, and temperance" of the people of Massachusetts and exhorted them to perseverance. John Adams clearly foresaw the impracticality of trying to combine patience and forbearance with absolute and open resistance to the rule of General Gage. Advising the people of his native province to prepare for war, he insisted that they be peaceable and avoid conflict if possible.

Another work of this Congress was to write addresses to the people of Great Britain, to George III, to the inhabitants of Quebec, and to the people of the British Colonies. These documents were not very popular with the more radical element in Congress, who were not satisfied with merely listing grievances and petitioning redress. In later years John Adams confessed that he had been unaware at the time of the importance of preparing these
addresses. Writing compositions had seemed inadequate and useless. His thoughts had been "nearly monopolized by the theory of our rights and wrongs, by measures for the defense of the country, and the means of governing ourselves." In later life, however, he realized the need of these addresses to justify the cause and cement the union of the colonies.\textsuperscript{40} Never had he expected to obtain redress by means of these petitions and the non-importation and non-exportation agreements. In fact, he claimed to have convinced Patrick Henry in 1774 that these documents would be but "waste paper" in England, and that the issue could only be settled by war.\textsuperscript{41}

Before adjourning, Congress resolved to meet again on May 10, 1775, at Philadelphia, provided the colonial grievances had not been redressed. Thus, after less than two months in session, the First Continental Congress dissolved on October 26. Two days later, John Adams left the "happy, the peaceful, the elegant, the hospitable and the polite city of Philadelphia." He thought the prospect of his seeing that "part of the world" again was unlikely, perhaps because he did not expect to be reelected as delegate to the Congress.\textsuperscript{42} En route to Braintree, he celebrated his thirty-ninth birthday.

The Congress, indeed, had not accomplished much. After all, the members could only consult about the best policy; they lacked authority to enforce their resolutions. Naturally the delegates from the southern and middle colonies were entirely
unwilling to commit themselves to open resistance to England, for they knew their constituents were not ready to keep step with radical Massachusetts. They feared a "rupture with the Troops" would likely involve the whole continent in war and render reconciliation hopeless. Since they were decisively averse to any hostilities unless absolutely necessary, the members of Congress did not vote to raise money and arms as Massachusetts vainly hoped. The people of that province must be patient and endure a hard winter, for commerce was almost stagnant, laws unenforced, criminals unpunished, and debts uncollected. John Adams, even before Congress assembled, foresaw this turn of events and expected the meeting at Philadelphia to be disappointing to the people of Massachusetts. At the time he had consoled himself with the hope of doing his duty and enjoying "good company, good conversation, and ... a fine ride." Even though the people of Massachusetts were not entirely satisfied, the Congress had accomplished all that could have reasonably been expected. The Bay Colony was assured of sympathy and support. The brightest hope was the precedent now established, for another Congress was to assemble in May. Much could happen in a few months.
NOTES TO CHAPTER I


4. Diary, June 20, 1774, Ibid., II. p.338.


7. J. Adams to Abigail Adams, Aug. 28, 1774, Ibid., p.26. Only four of the delegates chosen in Massachusetts attended the Congress; James Bowdoin declined the appointment.


10. John Adams called the City Tavern "the most genteel one in America." Diary, in The Works of John Adams, II. p.357. This tavern was also called Smith's Tavern.


23. Loc. cit.


25. Samuel Adams to Warren, Sept. 9, 1774, Ibid., I. p.27.


41. J. Adams to Wirt, Jan. 23, 1818, Ibid., X. p.278.

42. Diary, Oct. 28, 1774, Ibid., II. p.402.


44. J. Adams to Abigail Adams, July 6, 1774, in Familiar Letters, p.18.
CHAPTER II

THE APPOINTMENT OF WASHINGTON

Bloodshed at Lexington and Concord changed the whole aspect of things. Riding to Cambridge soon after the conflict, John Adams saw the disorder and lack of supplies in the New England army gathering there. Proceeding to Lexington, he gathered information at the scene of the battle. On his return he was taken ill with fever and was unable to set out for Philadelphia with his colleagues. He quickly recovered, however, and overtook his companions at New York.¹

All along the route to Philadelphia, the colonists showed their approbation of the conduct of Massachusetts by warmly receiving her delegates to the Congress. At New York, the militia and "almost the whole city" welcomed the delegates with not a word of blame for the conflict at Lexington. As a token of their approbation the people of Philadelphia received the Bostonians with open arms.²

Just like the last Congress, this Second Continental Congress opened with the appearance of a great spirit of unanimity. At first, John Adams expected Congress to support Massachusetts, for he thought that Lexington had aroused the military spirit of the continent,³ but very soon he was disillusioned. Every day convinced him more and more that the old jealousy and suspicion of
New England was still prevalent. 4

The critical state of affairs at Boston demanded the assistance of Congress, for General Artemus Ward could not keep his men together very long without aid from the outside. Clothing, money, munitions were needed sorely. Encouragement from the southern and middle colonies was essential if the New Englanders were to keep Gage's army in Boston. To propose that Congress should adopt the army at Cambridge under the command of a New England general was folly. The profound sectional jealousy would certainly have defeated such a proposal. Besides, the conservative element in Congress was urging a second petition to the king and stoutly opposing any leanings toward independence. Accordingly, to insure the adoption of the New England army by Congress, John Adams was willing to concede the appointment of George Washington as commander-in-chief.

In his Autobiography written many years later, John Adams recounted with much ado his part in the appointment of Washington. Surely in 1775 he did not fully realize the significance of his action, any more than he foresaw the happy result of his appointment of John Marshall as Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. His reminiscences of the nomination of Washington took on a glamor in his eyes because of the happy outcome of the event. Somewhat contrary to the impression Adams has left in his Autobiography, some leaders in Massachusetts saw the prudence of making Washington "generalissimo." At least Elbridge Gerry and Dr. Warren were
willing to concede to Virginia the honor of first place, that Massachusetts might secure the support of the other colonies in this crisis. 5

Over the choice of a general the members of Congress were greatly divided. A few favored John Hancock of Massachusetts, President of the Congress, who may have ambitioned the appointment merely as a compliment. John Adams testified that he noticed a sudden change in Hancock's countenance when he nominated Washington. A larger number were for General Charles Lee, who had frequently visited the members of the Congress in their lodgings and was reputed "one of the greatest generals in the world." Some favored Washington, but the largest number of delegates supported Artemus Ward. 6 Undoubtedly, this last group comprised most of the delegates from New England.

To propose Washington was a hazardous step. John Adams realized that sending a stranger to Cambridge to supplant General Ward would not be very agreeable to the New England militiamen. The officers of that army could justly resent the intrusion of an almost unknown Colonel from Virginia to replace a well-beloved leader. What if the army refused to accept Washington as its commander? John Adams foresaw that his nomination of Washington would most likely make him unpopular in his native province and would certainly necessitate a great deal of explaining, but the union of the colonies was worth any sacrifice.
At first he tried in private to win over his colleagues and friends to his way of thinking, but in vain. Then the bold stroke! Walking in the state-house yard one morning before the hour of Congress, John revealed to his cousin, Sam Adams, his intention of forcing Congress to take a definite stand about the adoption of the army at Cambridge. When John said that he intended to make a motion that Congress adopt the army and appoint Washington its commander, Sam did not reply.

Soon after Congress had assembled, John Adams arose and prefaced his speech by pointing out the danger of the army dissolving, the critical state of affairs in the colonies, and the uncertainty in the minds of the people. Then he proposed that Congress should adopt the army at Cambridge as the continental army and appoint a general. Without naming Washington, John Adams declared himself for "a gentleman from Virginia...whose skill and experience as an officer, whose independent fortune, great talents, and excellent universal character, would command the approbation of all America, and unite the cordial exertions of all the Colonies better than any other person in the Union." Washington realized that he was being praised and, "from his usual modesty, darted into the library-room."

In the debate that followed Adams' motion, Edmund Pendleton of Virginia and Roger Sherman of Connecticut voiced the opposition. Did not the army before Boston already have a general from Massachusetts with whom they were satisfied? Were they not
successfully holding General Gage's forces in Boston? Thomas Cushing of Massachusetts and others expressed their fears of discontent in the army if a stranger were to lead them. John Adams was surprised to find some of the Virginia delegates "very cool about the appointment of Washington." In reality, Pendleton opposed not Washington but the adoption of the New England army by the Continental Congress, the first open act of rebellion in which all the colonies shared. Consequently, Adams' boast that Virginia was "indebted to Massachusetts for Washington," because "Massachusetts made him a general against the inclination of Virginia," while "Virginia never made him more than a colonel," has little significance.

After the debate the subject was postponed. Meanwhile the dissenting members were privately persuaded to withdraw their opposition. When on June 15th Thomas Johnson of Maryland nominated Washington, Congress unanimously elected him commander of all the continental forces. In later life John Adams claimed that this unanimity was only apparent, for nearly one half of the members regretted the appointment.

John Adams always maintained that George Washington was called to command the continental forces because the Old Dominion expected to lead in all colonial affairs. Although Adams respected "the modest and virtuous, the amiable, generous, and brave George Washington," his prime motive in proposing Washington as commander-in-chief was not a belief in the superior abil-
ities of the man, but a desire to cement and secure the union of the colonies. Washington himself realized that the choice was due to "the partiality of the Congress, joined to a political motive." Another member of the Congress thought prudence demanded the choice of Washington to remove all fear "lest an Ente

prising eastern New England Gen'l. proving Successful, might with his Victorious Army give law to the Southern or Western Gent.

try." In this unquestionably most important appointment in all American History, Adams' share of credit is not slight. He did not, any more than his confreres, fully appreciate the true worth of Washington since that leader's ability to lead thousands of recruits against a well-disciplined army was yet to be proved. Yet Adams had the courage to set aside his own likes and prejudices for the sake of the union, even though he foresaw the explanations and apologies he would have to make to his fellow patriots in Massachusetts for substituting a stranger in place of General Ward. Some most intimate friends would question the wisdom of hazarding the cause of liberty by an appointment which might cause grave discontent in the militia. All in all, Adams suffered almost as "bitter exprobations for creating Washington commander-in-chief" as for defending Preston and his soldiers after the Boston Massacre.

The day after his election, Washington arose in Congress to accept the command. He thanked the assembly for the unsought
honor and promised to serve without pay. John Adams was charmed with this conduct of "a gentleman of one of the first fortunes" sacrificing ease and risking "all in the cause of his country." He admired the noble views and disinterestedness which prompted Washington to decline a "shilling for pay." Ten years later, however, Adams jealously attributed Washington's well-deserved popularity to the fact that he had not accepted pay, an action which "never fails to turn the heads of the multitude."

When in the following year Howe evacuated Boston, John Adams moved that thanks be given by Congress to Washington and his men for their "spirited conduct in the siege and acquisition of Boston," and that a gold medal be struck in commemoration of this event and presented to Washington. Congress appointed Adams chairman of the committee to prepare the letter of thanks and the device for the medal. This incident is chiefly interesting because the aged John Adams in his Autobiography complained about the omission of this letter of thanks from the Journals of Congress. A persecution complex induced Adams to suppose that the President or Secretary of Congress preferred to conceal the compliment to Washington rather than make another one "to the member who made the motion and the committee who prepared it."

One can only pity the suspicious John Adams of later life.

During the Revolution Adams was not blind to the sterling qualities of Washington, even though his support of that leader was partly due to expediency. Adams tried to preserve the happy
medium between improper opposition to the commander-in-chief and undue flattery. On one occasion in Congress when the proposal of referring the appointments of three major generals to the general officers of the army was under discussion, John Adams expressed his distress at seeing some members of Congress "idolise" and superstitiously venerate Washington, a creature of their own hands. After acknowledging Washington's superiority in private life, Adams pointed out that Congress was his superior and ought to restrain the army. In a letter to his wife Adams expressed more clearly his attitude toward excessive flattery of Washington. One reason for the thanksgiving Congress has appointed, he wrote, "ought to be that the glory of turning the tide of arms (at Saratoga) is not immediately due to the Commander-in-chief nor to southern troops. If it had been, idolatry and adulation would have been unbounded; so excessive as to endanger our liberties, for what I know. Now, we can allow a certain citizen to be wise, virtuous, and good, without thinking him a diety or a savior."

Certainly John Adams was not a strong supporter of Washington. In his Autobiography, however, he denied the calumnies circulated in the army that he "was an enemy of Washington" and "in favor of an annual election of a General." He attributed these reports to Harrison, Hancock, and their friends, adversaries of Samuel Adams, Richard Henry Lee, and Governor Ward, with whom John Adams had always been closely associated. Adams' proposal of an annual election of officers to weed out the inept-
ficient obviously did not include Washington, whose "character is justly very high." Yet such a proposal could easily be misconstrued and would not make him popular with the army.

Washington's train of disasters, the defeat on Long Island to the British troops, increased the grumblings and criticism of the members of Congress less favorable to him. In contrast, General Gates had won undeserved glory at Saratoga by the surrender of Burgoyne. Consequently, the tendency to set up Gates as a rival to Washington gained momentum. Fortunately, John Adams left Congress for Paris before the Conway Cabal matured. Thus, he was probably spared the dishonor of being an active anti-Washingtonian, although his sympathies lay with that group.

Hence, it is not at all surprising that on the eve of Adams' departure for France, General Knox should have visited the new ambassador at his home in Braintree. Naturally, Knox deemed it highly important that representatives abroad support the commander-in-chief's character. Adams' reply was that he esteemed Washington as "the most important character at that time among us; for he was the centre of our Union." He assured his visitor that he would support Washington's character "at all times and in all places."  

John Adams was jealous of Washington. Never could he appreciate the reason for Washington's preeminence. Perhaps a de-
sire for more recognition prompted John Adams' longings to be a soldier. Washington's appearance on the floor of Congress in 1775 in military garb caused some misgivings in the heart of John Adams. 23 A few days later when he accompanied General Washington and the other officers who were setting out for Massachusetts, he was somewhat crestfallen. After describing the scene to his wife, he continued, "Such is the pride and pomp of war. I, poor creature, worn out with scribbling for my bread and my liberty, low in spirits and weak in health, must leave to others to wear the laurels which I have sown; others to eat the bread which I have earned." 24 Again in the following year when Colonel Dickinson led forth his battalion at the call of General Lee, John Adams once more confessed his ambition to be "engaged in the more active, gay, and dangerous scenes." He could console himself, however, with the thought that he too was risking his life in the cause of liberty, for defeat would mean the gallows for the members of the Continental Congress. He was too old and prematurely worn out with study to join the army. Besides, there was no need, he reasoned, to incite the men of Massachusetts to arms by donning a uniform as Dickinson and Patrick Henry had done to awaken the martial spirit in Pennsylvania and Virginia. 25

Sectional jealousy over military appointments in the new continental army only began with the choice of Washington. The selection of a staff was a disagreeable task, and one that could easily create great bitterness. The delegation of each province
felt obliged to put forward their own militia officers and to insist on a proportional number of appointments. Experience and real merit were of secondary importance. John Adams complained that nothing gave him more anxiety and torment than the "Scuffle" in appointing the General Officers.

One member suggested General Charles Lee for second place, because an officer of his experience and rank could hardly be expected to serve in a lower place. John Adams, in turn, pointed out that Artemus Ward ought not to humiliate himself again by serving under a stranger like Lee. As a palliation to Massachusetts and New England, Ward was appointed second in command. John and Samuel Adams regretted that they were unable to prevail upon their colleagues to cast Massachusetts' vote for Lee and Gates as third and fourth ranking officers respectively. Although apprehensive of the attachment of the Massachusetts militia to their own officers, John Adams supported Lee and Gates because he believed their experience and abilities would be valuable on the council of officers, and because Washington desired their assistance.

Like other delegates, John Adams desired to secure places for his friends. He deeply regretted that he could not obtain the appointment of his frequent correspondent, James Warren. After mentioning his opportunity for proposing the advancement of two young acquaintances, John Adams remarked in a letter, "If they are neglected I shall be very mad, and kick and bounce like
On one occasion in Congress when Washington's request for engineers was under discussion, some members objected that the general already had several good engineers. Benjamin Harrison privately criticized these members as seeming to be "exceeding hearty in the Cause," yet wishing "to keep everything among themselves." Since he goes on to praise the disinterestedness and generosity of Hancock, Harrison, no doubt, had the two Adamses in mind. Yet they can be at least partially exonerated on the plea that they desired to avoid the intrusion of strangers into posts of trust in an army almost entirely from New England.

The question of advancement was the cause of many other quarrels in Congress. After spending the previous evening with General Arnold, John Adams wrote to his wife at four o'clock in the morning that he was wearied "with the wrangles between military officers, high and low," who "quarrel like cats and dogs." Never did he see the passion for superiority so keen and furious as among military officers, who "will go terrible lengths in their emulation, their envy, and revenge." Adams did not highly esteem "the delicate point of honor" so cherished by officers, which he termed "the honor of preferring a single step of promotion to the service of the public." As a consequence, he favored an annual election of general officers. He conceded to the different colonies the right to insist upon a number of officers proportionate to the troops raised. The rule of succession, he believed, could best be established among the officers.
of one colony. The power of promoting officers over their seniors for extraordinary merit, which should be used as seldom as possible, ought to be lodged not with the general, but with the assembly to prevent the abuse of favoritism as much as possible.

The number of foreign officers seeking places added to the difficulties of Congress. At times they embarrassed Congress, for to refuse men who were esteemed highly in friendly foreign governments or who had served the American agents abroad would have been impolitic. Besides, American agents abroad had, without consulting Congress, injudiciously hired hundreds of foreign officers to serve in the continental army. To install many of these strangers as officers, however, was bound to cause discontent in the ranks.

Different views about the pay of officers and men was a source of discord between New England and the other colonies. The more democratic New England colonies were accustomed to pay their privates well, almost as much as the officers. The southern colonies reimbursed their privates poorly and their officers handsomely. Equality, so highly prized in New England, was distasteful to southern gentlemen who desired to place the continental generals far above their men. The Massachusetts delegation tried in vain to reduce the large pay granted to officers, considered so extravagant in that colony. John Adams explained to friends at home that the New England delegates could not "suddenly alter the temper, principles, opinions, or prejudices" of
the other colonies. The whole society of the South was different. The few educated gentlemen of that section owned slaves; the common people were very ignorant and poor. Consequently, there existed no concept of equality. Characteristically, Adams remarked that the constitutions of the southern colonies would have to be changed to unify the continent in all respects. Of course, he could not conceive of changing the constitutions of the New England colonies so as to harmonize with the southern governments.

With the wage scale of the southern colonies adopted, New England had difficulty in enlisting privates. Towns endeavored to secure their quota by offering bounties of land and money and sometimes by promising additional pay. Such tactics were rightly frowned upon by General Washington because of the imprudence of paying different wages to the soldiers. In Congress John Adams and his colleagues had to listen to odious reflections on the venal spirit of the New England men. He urged his friends to reconcile the people to the amount of pay determined by Congress, for he shuddered "at the thought of proposing a bounty." He had already suffered much in defending the views of New England about the proper proportion between the wages of officers and men. In Massachusetts the time-honored custom had been to pay the troops by the lunar month; the Continental Congress had resolved to pay the soldiers by the calendar month. Again, Massachusetts had to submit for the sake of harmony.

In 1777, when the scene of the war was no longer in Mass-
achusetts, that colony was slow in sending its full quota to the continental army. The men of Massachusetts had already borne the brunt of the war for two years and were not anxious to march far from their native province. The constant reflections upon Massachusetts made in Congress at this time for having sent only one third of its quota greatly mortified John Adams. He feared too that if Ticonderoga fell, the loss would be imputed to New England, who had not garrisoned that post properly. Very pointedly he requested "to be supported or recalled." The torment of not being able to answer or contradict the reflections cast upon Massachusetts on the floor of Congress was intolerable to a man like John Adams.37
NOTES TO CHAPTER II


4. J. Adams to Abigail Adams, June 17, 1775, Ibid., p. 66.


9. J. Adams to Plumer, Mar. 28, 1813, Ibid., X. p. 36.


13. Dyer to Trumbull, June 17, 1775, in Letters of Members of the Continental Congress, I. p. 128. The fear may have been due in part to the acrimonious boundary dispute existing at this time between Pennsylvania and Connecticut.


18. Rush, Diary, Feb. 19, 1777, in Letters of Members of the Con-
continental Congress, II. p.262-3.
36. General Court of Massachusetts to Delegates in Congress, Dec. 5, 1775, in the American Archives (Fourth Series), IV. p.194.
CHAPTER III

TOWARD INDEPENDENCE

In his later life John Adams took great pains to combat the belief that Thomas Paine first thought of independence from Great Britain. Those who claimed the pamphlet, "Common Sense," first suggested to them the notion of independence, Adams considered to be men of little reflection and ignorant of the tendencies of the times. American independence was not "a novel idea," "a modern discovery," but was for a long time familiar to gentlemen of reflection in all parts of the colonies. Independence as a possible, perhaps necessary, measure in case Great Britain should assume unconstitutional powers was an idea familiar, according to Adams, even to Governor Winthrop and the early settlers.¹

At least, as early as 1755, Adams himself had expressed in writing the opinion that within another century the colonies would certainly be independent. For, by that time, he reasoned, they would be more populous than England and would control the seas because of their superior naval resources. Under these conditions the "united force of all Europe" could not subdue the colonies but could prevent their independence only by setting one colony against another.² During the opening years of the French and Indian War when the British generals were unsuccessfully conducting campaigns against the French, since he believed that the
colonies, if united, could defend themselves with greater success without the assistance of England, Adams longed to be free from English domination. But the victories of British arms before the close of the war caused him to rejoice once more in the name of Great Britain and in subjection to the king. In brief, though no general desire of independence existed before the Revolution, the wiser men, in Adams' opinion, foresaw that the tendency of the British Parliament to enslave the colonists would bring on war and, consequently, independence.

In tracing the origin of the idea of independence in the minds of the colonists, Adams' purpose was merely to belittle the perhaps undue credit given at the time to Thomas Paine's "Common Sense." Though this pamphlet undoubtedly served a worthy purpose in provoking among the colonists a lively discussion of independence, that all-important topic in the winter and spring of 1776, its great popularity and influence was largely due to its opportune publication. Contrary to the general opinion, Adams, somewhat envious of Paine's renown, doubted the importance of the pamphlet in converting the colonists to the doctrine of independence. He approved of only that part of "Common Sense" which presented the arguments in favor of independence. And even this part was only a "tolerable summary of the arguments which" he "had been repeating again and again in Congress for nine months."

One can understand how a vain man would resent having his strenuous oratorical efforts of many months on the floor of Con-
gress overshadowed by a few pages of writing that suddenly caught the popular fancy. But the green-eyed goddess certainly carried Adams to extremes when his memory attributed to Thomas Paine the preposterous boast that "nobody in America ever thought, till he revealed to them the mighty truth, that America would ever be independent." With no difficulty at all, Adams could refute the alleged claim of his opponent, for many colonists had discussed the possibility of independence long before Paine left England. But did Thomas Paine actually make such a ridiculous statement?

Already at the First Continental Congress in 1774, some colonists suspected the Massachusetts delegates of having independence in view. The sons of liberty in Philadelphia, Dr. Rush, Thomas Mifflin, and several others, warned the Bay Colony delegates against speaking of independence even in private conversation. Since hopes of compelling Great Britain to relinquish her tyrannical policies were high, the very idea of independence was unpopular in Pennsylvania and in the colonies to the south. Any suggestion of independence frightened and startled the people of Philadelphia, as John Adams soon discovered. Sizing up the situation, the Massachusetts delegates carefully avoided the mere suggestion of independence. Since a friend had written to him announcing that Massachusetts was "setting up for independency," George Washington sought an interview with the Boston gentlemen in order to learn the sentiments and designs of the leaders of the Bay Colony. Replying to his friend, Washington emphatically
expressed his conviction that independence was "not desired by any thinking man in all North America." 7

That anything short of independence would have fully satisfied the radical Sam Adams is very doubtful. To probe into the mind of John Adams at this time is more difficult; yet he apparently had cast aside all hope of reconciliation. In the winter of 1774-5 under the pseudonym of "Novanglus," he wrote a series of newspaper articles in reply to the arguments proposed by a loyalist. In one of these articles he stressed the possibility of a medium between absolute independence and complete subjection to the authority of Parliament. He claimed, moreover, that he did not know a single Whig in Massachusetts who wished for complete independence from the British crown. 8 But this vindication of the Whig position written for the public consumption did not necessarily reveal his own hopes and fears. Though he did not long for independence, John Adams, no doubt, considered it as the only solution to the struggle with Parliament.

In 1775 after the first clash of arms at Lexington, some delegates took no pains to conceal their desire of independence. On this question parties quickly formed in Congress. In favor of independence John Adams, Richard Henry Lee of Virginia, Roger Sherman of Connecticut, and Christopher Gadsden of South Carolina were the leading speakers, with Samuel Adams in the background. John Dickinson of Pennsylvania and James Duane of New York led the opposition, supported by John Jay, Benjamin Harrison, John
Hancock, Thomas Willing, and James Wilson.

In his writings of this period John Adams gave most attention to his arch-opponent, John Dickinson. In 1774, before the question of independence arose, Adams had a very favorable opinion of "The Farmer." He praised Dickinson for his modesty, ingenuity, and agreeableness; he was pleased with the election of Dickinson to Congress for he thought the new delegate devoted to the American cause.

In 1775, however, John Adams found Dickinson to be the greatest obstacle to his plans to adopt the army in Massachusetts, to recommend the institution of governments in all colonies, and to declare independence. Dickinson and the conservatives wanted to delay and to send another petition to the king. One day in Congress, Dickinson and his friends had supported their favorite measure with long speeches. John Adams arose and successfully replied to their arguments. Then John Sullivan of New Hampshire continued the debate against the sending of a second petition to the king. During the latter's speech, John Adams, called out into the state-house yard on business, left the assembly. According to the recollection of Adams, Dickinson darted out after him and angrily demanded why this measure of reconciliation was opposed. Dickinson haughtily threatened that the other colonies would have nothing to do with New England unless they concurred in peaceful measures. Fortunately Adams was "in a very happy temper" at the time. He coolly answered that he would not be fright
ened into approving measures contrary to his judgment. Rather, he suggested that both of them ought to submit to the decision of Congress. These were the last words Adams and Dickinson exchanged in private conversation. 10

At this time Benjamin Hichborn, a young man of Boston whom Adams knew but slightly, was importunately begging him for the privilege of carrying some letters to friends in Boston. This mark of confidence would restore the youth's reputation at home, for he had been unjustly suspected of being a Tory. To satisfy him, Adams wrote a few lines to his wife, Abigail, and to James Warren. Unfortunately, he acceded to the request just when he was irritated by the scene with Dickinson in the state-house yard and disappointed by the success of the second petition to the king. 11 To his close friend, James Warren, he freely confided the feelings of the moment. "A certain great Fortune and piddling Genius (Dickinson), whose fame has been trumpeted so loudly, has given a silly Cast to our whole Doings." He went on to express what he considered the proper objectives of Congress; to assume the legislative, executive, and judicial power of the continent, to frame a constitution, to establish a navy, to open the ports, and to seize the Tories as hostages for the victims in Boston. Only after these measures, which in practice amounted to independence, had been carried, was the time ripe for peace and reconciliation. The other letter to his wife was not so incriminating as this letter to James Warren. 12
The British captured Hichborn with the letters on his person as he was crossing the ferry at Rhode Island. Hoping that the wide publication of these intercepted letters would promote dissension among the members of the Continental Congress and would ruin Adams' reputation, the British authorities gave copies of the letters to the press. Adams maintained that he did not regret the publication of these letters because he had never concealed his desire for independence. Instead of producing the evil effects intended by the Tories, the letters helped to prepare the minds of the people for independence. At least John Adams thought so when he heard many colonists compliment these letters very highly. Years later, he called the letters "the first monument extant of the immortally glorious project of Independence."

Although he consoled himself with the thought that these tell-tale letters brought the cause of independence before the eyes of the people, he really suffered a great deal on account of his indiscretion. At their first meeting on the street after the publication of the intercepted letters, Dickinson haughtily snubbed Adams, passing him without any sign of recognition. Adams had bowed and doffed his hat, but from then on he was determined never again to recognize his fellow delegate in public. Quakers and others showed their disapproval of the letters by scorning Adams and avoiding him as a leper whenever he walked the streets of Philadelphia. Like the "burnt child" he had learnt his lesson and carefully avoided compromising himself again in
his correspondence. No more would he criticize characters, for he had smarted "too severely for a few crude expressions written in a pet to a bosom friend, to venture on such boldness again." From now on his letters are mostly concerned with trifles since he feared the enemy would expose anything of consequence.

Thus, after hostilities had broken out at Lexington, Adams put aside all thought of peace and reconciliation. His whole care was to prepare for war, which he considered the most efficacious means of securing American rights and a lasting peace. Yet he realized many people had not abandoned all hope of reconciliation, but wanted "to hold the sword in one hand and the olive branch in the other." Congress showed indulgence to the few members who, still hoping for reconciliation, wanted to proceed slowly. Respecting the ability and honesty of Dickinson, Congress finally allowed him to draw up the "Second Petition to the King" in words that conformed to his own ideas. Although most of the members were dissatisfied with this petition, they passed it without amendment because of the delight the document gave Dickinson. After the passage of the petition, Dickinson expressed his joy by remarking that he disapproved of only one word in the whole paper, the term "Congress." Gaining the floor immediately, Benjamin Harrison rejoined that he approved of only one word, the word "Congress." In reality this petition was a worth-while experiment which conclusively proved to many people in the middle col-
ories that a petition written in the most submissive tone would not be favorably received by George III. John Adams was set against this petition to the king; yet he knew that it could not be avoided without discord and disunion. He hoped that Parliament would be afraid of negotiation, for otherwise the colonies would have difficulty in avoiding being "wheedled" out of their freedom. 20

After the recess during the month of August 1775, Congress reassembled. Thus far John Adams had been successful in securing the adoption of the army at Cambridge as the continental army; otherwise Dickinson's counsels had prevailed in the May-July session. The followers of Dickinson marked time from September through October while they waited for a reply to the petition sent to the king. Meanwhile, John Adams and others kept insisting on the futility of conciliatory measures and urging the need of supporting the army to the utmost.

Already in June Congress had considered Massachusetts' request to assume the exercise of the powers of civil government. At the same time Adams urged Congress to recommend to the people of every colony the calling of a convention to institute a new government. But a Congress anxious for reconciliation was wary of proposals that tended toward independence. Congress solved the question by directing the people of Massachusetts to consider the governor as absent as long as he refused to obey the charter, and, accordingly, to allow the assembly to exercise the

In November 1775, Congress considered New Hampshire's similar request for advice concerning the administration of justice. News had just arrived that George III had spurned Dickinson's olive branch, the Second Petition to the King. Consequently, Congress was a trifle more bold, though still wary of a wide breach with the Mother Country. John Adams' counsels prevailed to some extent, for Congress directed the people of New Hampshire to establish a temporary government which would promote peace and good order during "the present dispute between Great Britain and the colonies." Adams himself thought the words "dispute" and "colony" instead of "war" and "state" watered down the force of the resolution; yet he considered the resolution a triumph. The government was limited to "the present dispute" in order to ease the minds of the delegates fearful of independence.

During the winter of 1775-76, "Common Sense" appeared. Although John Adams liked the arguments in favor of independence, he was disgusted with the part of the pamphlet which proposed a plan of government for the separate colonies. One evening after a long conversation with George Wythe on the subject of forms of governments, Adams at the request of his listener wrote a letter containing his own views on government. When Richard Henry Lee saw this letter, he urged its publication as a pamphlet. Adams agreed on condition that it was published anonymously, for he
feared his name would excite "a continental clamor among the
stories, that I was erecting a battering-ram to demolish the roy-
al government and render independence indispensable." In his
Autobiography, Adams claimed that this work, entitled "Thoughts
on Government," influenced the constitutions of New York, Virgi-
ia, North Carolina, and New Jersey. He confided to his wife,
however, that this pamphlet was a "hasty, hurried thing, and of
no great consequence," intended for the southern and middle col-
onies. At least it would serve its purpose by setting people
thinking on the subject of government.

Not until May 10th did Adams' efforts of the past year to
secure the institution of government bear fruit, for on that day
Congress finally recommended to the assemblies of the colonies
"to adopt such governments as shall ... best conduce to the hap-
INESS and safety" of the people. John Adams, Edward Rutledge,
and Richard Henry Lee were appointed a committee to prepare a
preamble to this resolve. The other two members of the committee
requested the chairman, John Adams, to draw up a short preamble.
While little opposition was made to the resolution, the preamble
was the cause of several days debate and was passed by Congress
with difficulty. The delegates from Maryland withdrew from Con-
gress for a time, that they might obtain instructions on how to
"conduct themselves upon this alarming occasion." Duane of the
opposition called the preamble "a machine for the fabrication of
independence." Adams himself considered the preamble equiva-
lent to absolute independence, saving only the formal declaration for all authority of the crown in the colonies was denied. He was greatly awed by the thought that he had been an instrument "in touching some springs and turning some small wheels" in the movement toward independence.29

Like the question of instituting governments in the colonies, the question of making alliances with foreign powers was closely linked with independence. In the fall of 1775 Samuel Chase's proposal to send ambassadors to France with conditional instructions was "murdered."30 On that occasion Adams believed he made his greatest impression on Congress. His eloquent speech stressed two important points. France, he forcefully reasoned, would naturally be willing to avenge her humiliating defeat in the Seven Years' War and to protect her remaining dominions especially in the West Indies. Secondly, the American colonies, he urged, should carefully avoid European entanglements by making only treaties of commerce. These thoughts of Adams evoked great praise from many members of Congress, even from Duane and Dickinson.31 Although the question of alliances was frequently proposed in the succeeding months, it was opposed and postponed during that session.32 Not until independence had been declared, did Congress appoint a committee to prepare the model of a treaty with France. Then, John Adams was able to draw up a plan of a treaty which avoided entangling alliances and exclusive privileges and to obtain its adoption by the Congress.33
In another move toward independence, John Adams continually urged privateering and the opening of the ports. But the conservatives skillfully postponed all considerations of these questions because they believed them to be stepping stones toward independence. Finally on March 23rd Congress permitted privateering and on April 6th opened the ports. Adams sarcastically warned a friend not to call these measures "Independency," for "Independency is a Hobgoblin of so frightful Mien, that it would throw a delicate Person into Fits to look it in the Face."34

Until May 1776 Congress deliberately postponed all measures which openly implied independence. From Adams' viewpoint the conservative party headed by Dickinson was stalling for time in order to avoid discussion of the important subjects of independence, confederation, and foreign treaties. Trifling business was designedly employed to divert the attention of Congress from these matters of major importance. Adams called the letter of Lord Drummond sent through General Washington, which was discussed for several days in the committee of the whole, a "fine engine to play cold water on the fire of independence." To object to the wholesale waste of time was only a further waste of time.35

Adams might impatiently complain about the delay in the matter of independence; yet Congress was not ready for action. In January 1776 Congress almost made a formal declaration of its opposition to independence. John Adams was absent at the time; Samuel Adams, greatly alarmed at the proposal, was able to have
the matter postponed. Later a debate concerning a declaration of independence brought to light the positive instructions of nearly half the colonies to their delegates forbidding them to agree to independence without consulting their constituents. Even in April a majority of the members of Congress were at least timid about taking decisive steps toward the measures preparatory to independence. Many were expecting commissioners from England empowered to treat with Congress and to grant their demands. Adams "laughed," "scolded," and "grieved at" the story of commissioners, and was sorry to hear that many of his friends had been "taken in" by it. He rightly conjectured that the so-called commissioners were only empowered to receive submission.

Adams repeatedly complained that the colonies were conducting but a half-hearted war because they were constantly thinking of reconciliation and not fully supporting the army. Perhaps he never fully realized that the people in the middle and southern colonies, unaffected by the Boston Port Bill and far from the scene of hostilities, had less reason than New England to declare independence hastily. He should have taken to heart his own comparison of the colonies to "a large fleet sailing under convoy" in which the "fleetest sailers must wait for the dullest and slowest." Even years later blame was put by him on Dickinson's Second Petition to the King for the loss of General Warren and Charleston. To Dickinson's unceasing efforts against independence Adams attributed the loss of General Montgomery and Quebec, for many began to hope the expedition to Canada would fail lest
the colonies, buoyed up with success, would stop listening to plans for reconciliation. Immediately after the Declaration of Independence had been passed, however, he admitted the wisdom of the delay that destroyed all hope of reconciliation and afforded ample time for mature consideration. 40

In the spring of 1776 while John Adams was busily urging independence, the opposition started a whispering campaign against him. Adams was accused of being an interested party in regard to independence because he held an office under the new government of Massachusetts, the post of Chief Justice in the Superior Court of Judicature. Criticism was so cleverly spread abroad that the Maryland delegates, armed with instructions from the Maryland legislature, made a resolution in Congress that no member should hold any office in the new government of the colonies. Suspecting that this resolution was leveled at him, John Adams, equal to the occasion, arose and coolly seconded the motion with a slight amendment that no member should hold office under any government old or new. According to Adams, his proposal went through the assembly "like an electric shock," for nearly every member held some office either civil or military. Adams went on to propose a self-denying ordinance, that before Congress considered the question of independence, every member should take an oath never to accept any office or procure one for a relative. The whole discussion was quickly dropped, for a member aptly pointed out that Congress had no right to exclude members from voting.
Very effectively Adams had defended himself against this personal attack. He himself felt that his acceptance of the post of Chief Justice had been one of the most disinterested actions of his life for he was compelled to relinquish a far more profitable business at the bar. He claimed that his only motive for accepting the office was his fear that a refusal would have weakened the new constitution of Massachusetts, since offices under the new government were not popular.41
NOTES TO CHAPTER III


2. J. Adams to Webb, Oct. 12, 1755, Ibid., I. p.23-4. This letter, written before he reached the age of twenty, was discovered and returned to Adams in 1807.


13. Extract of letter from officer on board the Swan stationed at Rhode Island, in American Archives (Fourth Series), II. p.1717.


17. J. Adams to Chase, June 14, 1776, Ibid., IX. p.396.


22. Ibid., (Nov. 3, 1775) III. p.319.


38. J. Adams to Abigail Adams, Apr. 15, 1776, in Familiar Letters, p.158.


CHAPTER IV

THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE

Already in the summer of 1775 the two Adamses and a few others were suggesting independence from Great Britain. But independence did not assume the character of a vital issue among the people of the colonies until the winter of 1775-76. At that time Paine's "Common Sense" appeared, and newspapers began to publish open vindications of the doctrine of independence. Fear and restraint were swept aside; speculations on the subject were common. During the spring the former small party in favor of independence rapidly increased, but the majority of the people still hung back, vainly hoping for reconciliation. When all hopes of commissioners from England empowered to treat with Congress and to make concessions faded out, the opposition to independence quickly lost ground. News of the treaties made by the English Parliament with Hesse and Brunswick to secure mercenaries for service in the colonies convinced the Americans that the Mother Country was determined to subdue them. Of necessity the choice was between subjection and independence.

Slowly the colonies were falling in line on the question of independence. By the middle of May the four southern colonies had conferred ample powers upon their delegates in the Continental Congress to make a declaration of independence. The four New England colonies had been waiting for such a declaration for some
time. The five middle colonies, however, still hung back. By this time John Adams was entirely confident that independence would be declared soon. Already he anticipated his joy and satisfaction in seeing Congress pass the very resolutions he had been urging for almost a year; already he gloated over his satisfaction in seeing Dickinson confess the wisdom of the measures Adams had been pressing during the past year. 3

On June 8th, the committee of the whole considered Richard Henry Lee's motion that the colonies make a declaration of independence. The entire delegations from Virginia, Georgia, and New England supported this motion. Robert Livingston, James Wilson, John Dickinson, and Edward Rutledge ("the sensible part of the house," according to Rutledge), argued against the wisdom of giving the enemy notice of one's intentions before taking any steps to execute them. Besides, they pointed out the folly of trying to form a union with foreign powers before the colonies had united with each other. These conservatives, therefore, professed their willingness to discuss a plan of confederation for the colonies and to prepare a treaty to be sent to France. Independence, however, must wait. 4 After several days' debate, the reasoning of the conservatives prevailed, and the question of independence was postponed for three weeks. This delay was intended to give an opportunity to the delegates of the hesitant colonies to consult their constituents on the question of independence. Meanwhile, however, to prevent any loss of time if
Congress should agree to Lee's resolution, Congress determined to appoint a committee to prepare a declaration of independence. Thomas Jefferson was chosen chairman; John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Roger Sherman, and Robert Livingston rounded out the committee. Congress also appointed a committee of thirteen members, one from each colony, to prepare a plan of confederation. At the same time Dickinson, Franklin, John Adams, Harrison, and Robert Morris were constituted a committee "to prepare a plan of treaties to be proposed to foreign powers."

John Adams believed the natural order of procedure was that each colony should first institute a government for itself, then the thirteen colonies should confederate and declare their independence and sovereignty. Finally, the new confederation should make treaties with foreign powers. Yet he feared Congress would not be able to follow such a systematic and logical course, but would be compelled to declare independence before all the colonies had established their governments and before they had united in some form of confederation. For the past year he had uppermost in his mind these four measures of instituting governments, of confederating, of declaring independence, and of making foreign alliances. Now that his hopes were almost realized, he was looking forward to the time when he could sing his "nunc dimittis" and return to his law practice. But at the moment he was in "the very midst of a revolution, the most complete, unexpected, and remarkable, of any in the history of nations." He realized the
importance of these measures which involved the "lives and liberties of millions yet unborn." 7

Of these measures only that of independence aroused much opposition. John Adams believed that but two plausible arguments had been urged against a declaration of independence. In the first place it was said that such a step would unite all the people of Great Britain against the colonies. Adams replied to this first argument that Great Britain was already as united as possible, and that a declaration would rather unite the friends of liberty in Great Britain against the ministry. Secondly, it was objected that a declaration would put the colonies in the power of France and Spain, who would demand severe terms. Adams answered by repeating that he desired to make only commercial treaties, which foreign nations would never do until the colonies had declared their independence. No longer, Adams thought, would the war be half-hearted. The colonies would manufacture more saltpetre, sulphur, powder, and whatever else was needed. The continental army would fight with greater spirit; privateers would swarm the seas; traitorous speculations would be banned from the newspapers; the governments of the colonies would act with new vigor. 8 In short, a declaration of independence would unite all in one aim and effort.

With the prospect of independence so near, John Adams seemed to find the delay all the more unbearable. Paraphrasing the saying of Demosthenes that action was first, second, and third
qualities of a speaker, a colleague repeatedly remarked to Adams that the "first virtue of a politician is patience; the second is patience; and the third is patience." In writing at this time to a friend who had been elected for the first time to a public office, Adams advised him to acquire all the patience of Job that he might endure the disappointments and provocations of public life. Patiently Adams went on with the drudgery of a Congress, whose meetings were now longer than before because the great importance of the measures under consideration demanded additional hours of discussion and debate.

By the middle of June, John Adams knew that the colonies of Delaware and Pennsylvania had given their delegates "full powers" to vote on the question of independence. Then came the good news that New Jersey had chosen new delegates who would "vote plump" for independence on July 1st. The same day Adams warned Chase that his native province of Maryland must "soon join company" or be "left alone," for the other colonies would not postpone the question beyond the appointed day. New York, too, still hesitated.

Why had Thomas Jefferson been elected chairman of the committee to prepare the draught of the Declaration of Independence? In later life Adams explained that this young man, only thirty-three years old, had been chosen because of his "reputation of a masterly pen." In Congress Jefferson took little active part and rarely spoke in public. Though he was silent on the floor of Con
gress, Jefferson was "prompt, frank, explicit, and decisive" in committee work. For this reason Adams urged the election of Jefferson to this important committee. Besides Jefferson's talent for writing, another factor influenced the choice according to John Adams. A delegate from Virginia, so the Frankfort advice ran, was to lead in all important matters. Perhaps Adams was disappointed because by only one vote he had lost the honor of being chairman. 11

As to what happened on this famous committee Jefferson and Adams have slightly different stories. Nearly thirty years after the event John Adams narrated some of the incidents which had taken place. He recalled how the committee met a few times to propose the articles to be included in the Declaration of Independence and then appointed Jefferson and himself a sub-committee to put these suggestions in form. When the sub-committee met, Adams declined to make the draught, giving Jefferson three reasons for his refusal. A delegate from Virginia, not one from Massachusetts, should take the lead; Adams was too suspected and unpopular because of his constant insistence on independence; Jefferson could write much better than his fellow sub-committee man. Yielding to this reasoning, Jefferson wrote the draught of the Declaration. After the sub-committee met and Adams read Jefferson's work he remembers objecting to calling George III a tyrant and recalls that he thought the clause about negro slavery would excite much opposition. He could not remember making any corrections in the
document. Then the larger committee of five considered the draught and reported it to Congress. Whether the committee had altered the original draught or not, Adams could not remember. After severe criticism and some changes, the Declaration was adopted on July 4th. Thus John Adams recalled the incident nearly thirty years later.

In 1823, forty seven years after the event, Thomas Jefferson contradicted some of the details of Adams' story. Timothy Pickering had requested the aged John Adams to write a few lines about the origin of the Declaration of Independence in order that he might incorporate these remarks in his Fourth of July Address. Adams complied with this request and wrote a long letter to Pickering in which he elaborated the account he had written many years before in his Autobiography. Some of the quotations from this letter used by Pickering in his address reached Jefferson. The latter in a letter to James Madison denied that a sub-committee had been appointed. Rather the other four members of the committee had pressed Jefferson to make the draught of the Declaration and he agreed to do so. Before he reported his draught to the committee, Jefferson showed it to Adams and Franklin, first privately to one then to the other, asking for their opinions and corrections. Both Franklin and Adams made two or three slight verbal changes. After transcribing the document, Jefferson gave it to the committee of five who reported it to Congress unaltered. Thus Jefferson told the story which he supported by written notes
taken at that very time. 12

This incident is not of very great importance. Yet surely one can more easily credit Jefferson's positive statements based on written notes than Adams' memory. As Jefferson suggested, Adams could have readily confused the private meeting in which Jefferson showed him the draught of the Declaration, with a meeting of the sub-committee. Such a slip of the memory after thirty years would not be surprising.

Disappointing, indeed, it is to hear John Adams in his old age belittling the part Jefferson played in the Declaration of Independence. Every idea in that document, according to John Adams, "had been hackneyed in Congress" during the previous years. The Declaration of Rights drawn up in 1774 contained the substance of what Jefferson wrote two years later. When Adams read the Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence for the first time in 1819, he immediately mailed a copy of it to Jefferson. Since he believed this paper had been written in 1775, Adams concluded that Jefferson "must have seen" it before he penned his famous Declaration of Independence, "for he has copied the spirit, the sense, and the expressions of it verbatim." 13 Thus, without reason, the disappointed statesman secluded at Braintree in his later years vainly tried to discredit the work of a former friend whose fame had overshadowed his own.

To the morning of that long awaited day, July 1st, had been
assigned "the greatest debate of all." In order to consider whether the colonies should declare themselves free and independent states, Congress resolved itself into a committee of the whole. Adams did not expect Congress to spend much time debating this resolution of independence, because the question had been frequently discussed before. John Dickinson, however, arose before his fellow delegates to voice the last formal protest in a long, well-prepared speech. With "great ingenuity and eloquence" he repeated all the familiar arguments which had been advanced against a declaration of independence. No one arose to answer him.

During the past year John Adams, Richard Henry Lee, Roger Sherman, and Christopher Gadsden had led the debate on the floor against the dilatory measures of the conservative party. Of these speakers only Adams and Sherman were present at this time. The absence of Lee in particular was a great loss. Consequently, the burden of the debate in favor of independence fell on Adams. On this occasion he had hoped that someone less obnoxious to the conservatives than himself would reply to Dickinson's arguments. Unprepared, he began his speech by expressing his desire for the "talents and eloquence of the ancient orators of Greece and Rome, so that he might properly debate this important measure of independence. Then one by one, he answered the arguments advanced by Dickinson.

When he had finished, the committee of the whole prepared to vote on the question of independence. At that moment the new-
ly elected delegates from New Jersey entered the hall of Congress. As soon as these members learned what important business was in progress, they urgently requested to hear the arguments before they voted on the question. Prevailed upon to speak, John Adams briefly summarized the reasons pro and con until the New Jersey delegates confessed themselves satisfied. 15 When the committee of the whole put the resolution for independence to a vote, ten colonies approved the measure. Pennsylvania and South Carolina opposed it; while the delegates from New York did not vote because they had not been empowered to do so by their assembly. Only that very morning before the debate began, had the Maryland delegates received instructions to concur with the other colonies in declaring independence. 16

When the committee of the whole reported the resolution to the house, one colony requested that consideration of it be postponed until the next day. Thus, a great part of July 1st had been spent in the committee of the whole discussing independence. The long debate was a sheer waste of time, according to Adams, since the same ideas and reasons were repeated for the hundredth time within six months. 17

On the following day, however, "the greatest question was decided which ever was debated in America, and a greater, perhaps, never was nor will be among men," for Congress resolved that "these United Colonies are, and, of right, ought to be, Free and Independent States." This important resolution was passed with-
out one dissenting colony.\textsuperscript{18} Again the delegates of New York did not vote. The assembly of that colony finally approved of the Declaration of Independence on July 9th.\textsuperscript{19} Since Dickinson and Morris purposely absented themselves from Congress on July 2, the vote of Pennsylvania was cast in favor of independence. Although a majority of the delegates in each of the colonies except New York voted for the measure, John Adams was of the opinion that many members were filled "with regret, ... many doubts and much lukewarmness."\textsuperscript{20}

Now the delegates in Congress had decided at last that the thirteen colonies should be independent of England. They had also to approve of some formal declaration to the world of the fact of separation and the worthy motives promoting such action. The committee appointed to prepare a declaration of independence had already reported Jefferson's draught to Congress. On July 2, 3, and 4th the committee of the whole considered the document, making all necessary changes. Finally on the 4th, all the colonies except New York agreed to the Declaration of Independence. Not until the Declaration has been engrossed and an American seal had been prepared did the members of Congress subscribe their names to the document on August 2. Authenticated copies, however, were immediately printed and sent to the assemblies of the new states and to the army.\textsuperscript{21} On July 8th the Declaration of Independence was read to the people of Philadelphia in the state-house yard. The crowd gave three cheers; soldiers paraded on the Common; bells
rang all day and most of the night.\textsuperscript{22} The arrival of the news brought similar rejoicing to the other towns in the colonies.

John Adams prophesied that July 2 would be "the most memorable epoch in the history of America," and "the great anniversary festival" for succeeding generations. He believed that a grateful people would commemorate this "day of deliverance, by solemn acts of devotion to God Almighty." Americans, however, have followed out much better his second suggestion to celebrate the day "with pomp and parade, with shows, games, sports, guns, bells, bonfires, and illuminations, from one end of this continent to the other, from this time forward forevermore."\textsuperscript{23} Custom alone has attributed independence to the 4th of July rather than to the 2nd; surely the approval of the document written by Jefferson was not more important than the resolution of Congress to make that declaration.

Recalling the political events of the past fifteen years which had caused the revolution, John Adams was surprised at its suddenness and greatness. Yet the revolution was only the beginning. Time would tell whether America was acting with wisdom or folly. Money and lives would be spent in upholding the ideas of the Declaration of Independence; calamity and distress would try the young nation and remove the dross of errors and vices.\textsuperscript{24} For the moment, however, Adams could rejoice that one great irretraceable step had been taken, and that he had a large share in it.

On his return home, Richard Stockton, a delegate from New
Jersey, remarked that America was most indebted to John Adams for independence, for this "Atlas of American independence" sustained the debate and clearly pointed out the expediency and justice of the Declaration. In later years Thomas Jefferson spoke of Adams as the "ablest advocate and defender" of the Declaration of Independence and the "pillar of it's (sic) support on the floor of Congress." Even after Adams had jealously remarked that Jefferson's work contained nothing but hackneyed ideas, the author of the Declaration admitted Adams had supported it "with zeal and ability, fighting fearlessly for every word." Believing others could judge the merits of the document better, Jefferson had quietly listened to the bitter criticisms of his work made during the debate.

Thomas Jefferson penned the famous document declaring American Independence to the world and to all time; John Adams defended the Declaration on the floor of Congress. To these two more than any other is due the Declaration of Independence. By the strangest and most appropriate coincidence of history, these two friends, John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, died on the same day, July 4, 1826, fifty years to the day after the Continental Congress had approved of the Declaration of Independence.
NOTES TO CHAPTER IV


10. J. Adams to Chase, June 14, 1776, Ibid., IX. p.398. The latter part of this letter was probably written on June 16, for the news about New Jersey could hardly have arrived sooner. Cf. Ibid., III. p.55, note.


19. Ibid., (July 15, 1776) V. p.561.


CHAPTER V

COMMITTEE WORK

The Continental Congress was seldom idle. Thirty to sixty delegates had to carry out all the legislative and executive functions of a government during war time. This government, moreover, was not a well-established, smooth-running government, but rather an assembly which had to create precedents and form a confederation between thirteen jealous provincial governments. A continental army had to be raised, fed, clothed, and paid; a navy had to be built; officers had to be appointed; forts garrisoned; ports fortified; guns and ammunition obtained; Indians placated; treaties negotiated; peace proposals considered; petitions redressed; money obtained; military operations directed; and a hundred other minor business details attended to.

Ordinarily, the session of Congress began at nine or ten in the morning. From that time until four or five in the afternoon the delegates deliberated and debated the business of the day. When important questions were being discussed, Congress occasionally sat until six or even seven o'clock. In the latter part of 1777 Congress adopted the order of holding two sessions a day, one at ten in the morning, the other at four in the afternoon. Besides the regular daily session or sessions, the delegates were frequently engaged in committee work before and after the hours of Congress.
Naturally the members complained about the long hours. In 1775 John Adams excused himself for not corresponding oftener on the plea that he was busy in committee from seven to ten o'clock in the morning, engaged in Congress from ten to four, and occupied again with committee work in the evening from six to ten. Not Adams alone, but all the members spent their mornings and evenings in committee, because there was more business than men to handle it. Again in the latter part of 1776, after the particularly onerous task of being chairman of the board of war had fallen upon his shoulders, he complained that from four in the morning until ten at night he had "not a single moment" to call his own. That he had not contracted consumption or some other bodily ill because of such a busy, sedentary life was "little less than a miracle." Silas Deane of Connecticut was weary of his share of committee work and wished that he might be appointed less frequently. To attend Congress every day was hard enough, he thought; but to sacrifice all his spare time on committees was too much. His constitution would not endure "Eleven hours at a sitting"; from six in the morning until five in the evening he had but "one dish of coffee." Deane's usual order of the day, however, was to spend from eight until ten o'clock in committee, ten until four in Congress, then five until nine again in committee. A full and busy day, indeed, was the lot of the members of the Continental Congress. No wonder Adams remarked that in the "exhausting, debilitating climate" of Philadelphia in summer the lives of the delegates were "more exposed than they would be in camp."
More to be pitied was the member who had no colleagues in Congress. Josiah Bartlett begged the assembly of New Hampshire to appoint other delegates to assist him. Every morning and evening he attended committees; yet New Hampshire was often unrepresented on important committees. The responsibility, moreover, was too great for one man. Subjected to such a routine, Bartlett longed for more bodily and less mental exercise.6 Joseph Hewes, the sole delegate from North Carolina for almost three months, occasionally did not eat nor drink from six in the morning until six in the evening.7 William Hooper, who relieved Hewes, confessed himself wearied to death with the meetings of Congress and committees. He was obliged, however, constantly to attend the sessions of Congress, because without a member from North Carolina present, Congress would lack the quorum of colonies necessary for conducting business, for at that time four colonies had no representatives in Philadelphia.8

In his Autobiography, John Adams remarked that he "unquestionably did more business than any other member" of Congress.9 Was this an idle boast? Perhaps not, for during the space of two years, 1776 and 1777, he attended Congress for a total of seventeen months; while, at the same time, the other delegates often returned to their native provinces for long visits. Many of them had been relieved of the onerous task of attending Congress after a year or two of service. Early in 1777, Adams could count five colleagues who had been members of Congress in 1774, Sam Adams, Richard Henry Lee, Sherman, Chase, and Paca.10
in Congress, Adams served on ninety committees and was chairman of twenty-five of them. Yet to substantiate Adams' claim of having done more work than anyone else would be impossible.

Adams himself could not understand how he found time to write as many letters as he did at this time. At every opportunity he wrote several pages to his wife; business compelled him to correspond with many officers in the army, with friends in Massachusetts, and with delegates who had returned home for a time. On one occasion when he sent two bundles of letters to Braintree for safe keeping, he remarked to his wife that his "private correspondence alone is business enough for a lazy man." All The number of extant letters prove this statement no exaggeration.

Of all the committees in Congress, perhaps none had so much work to do as the board of war and ordnance. In reality, this board had executive functions equivalent to the duties of a minister of war assisted by his many secretaries and clerks. And such an office has an increasing amount of business to handle during war time. In 1776, moreover, there was little precedent to build upon, and thirteen jealous governments to satisfy. In creating this board of war and ordnance, Congress outlined its many duties. The board was to obtain and keep a register of all the officers of the army, to record the location and condition of all the troops, to procure all the artillery, arms, ammunition, and warlike stores necessary for the army, to hire magazines for the storage of ammunition not in use, to forward all despatches
and money from Congress to the armies by providing suitable escorts for their safe conveyance, to superintend the raising, fitting out, and despatching of all land forces, to care for all prisoners of war, to preserve all original letters and papers received, and finally to keep an accurate account of all the business contracted. To assist the war board in carrying out all these duties, Congress appointed a secretary and several clerks. In paging through the Journals of the next year and a half, one cannot help noticing the constancy with which Congress referred all sorts of details to the war board.

As chairman of this standing committee, Congress selected John Adams. He acquiesced, although he felt himself unqualified for the post. The amount of work, he feared, was more than his health could safely bear; the type of work was not suited to his taste; his education and experience had not fitted him to discharge such an important trust. Yet, since he could not honorably decline this arduous task he determined to make industry supply his deficiency, for his lack of experience and ability he felt was a great barrier. Confessing his ignorance of matters of war, he begged his friends in the army for advice and assistance.

Besides his constant attendance at the sessions of Congress, Adams had to be present at the two daily meetings of the board of war and ordnance, one in the morning and one in the evening. The chairman, of course, "must never be absent," but the other members of the board, according to Adams, attended meetings as they
pleased. The chairman, moreover, had to explain and justify the reports of the board on the floor of Congress. For a year and a half, he endured the routine and drudgery of this work, far more work, he thought, than lawyers performed who earned a ten thousand dollar a year salary. Perhaps the most thankless task of the war board was to maintain the authority of Congress in the many disputes between that body and the officers of the army. To keep the generals satisfied was extremely difficult, and as a consequence, the chairman's private correspondence with officers of the army increased considerably. All in all, he found it necessary to spend the greater part of his time in the tedious details of the board of war and ordnance.

To lighten the burden imposed on the members of this board and to conduct the business more efficiently, Congress acted upon the suggestion to hand over the actual administration of military matters to capable men who were not members of Congress. In December 1776, Congress appointed a committee on departments which was instructed to prepare a plan for the establishment of executive boards composed of non-members. Much delay ensued. Not until October 1777 did Congress finally resolve to appoint three non-members to take charge of military matters under the direct supervision of the members of Congress. These men with military experience had hardly been chosen to carry out the extensive and important business of the war board, when the statesman from Braintree left the Continental Congress to spend many years a-
broad in the diplomatic service.

The establishment of an American navy was a project dear to the heart of John Adams. His share in laying the foundation of the navy was an honor that he made "it a point to boast of upon all occasions." No other man, he believed, had done more than he in furthering this necessary measure; he struggled "against the wind and tide" and at last was successful. Although he had little experience with ships, he spent his life near Boston, the leading sea-port of America at that time. Often he conducted law suits that involved cargoes and ships; often he listened to the daring Yankee seamen. As a representative of Massachusetts to the Congress, almost perforce he had to be interested in things nautical. Naturally, he was confident that the daring and enterprising Yankee seamen could readily distress the enemy's shipping and relieve the wants of the colonies by trading with the West Indies and Europe.

Captain John Manly asked permission of General Washington to cruise for British transports and merchant ships which frequently sailed unarmed to Quebec. Washington referred the matter to Congress. On October 5, 1775, Congress appointed John Langdon, Silas Deane, and John Adams a committee to prepare a plan for intercepting two vessels loaded with arms and powder which were reported to be on their way to Canada. The very same day this committee made its report. An animated debate followed. The opposition, led by the eloquent Edward Rutledge, represented
the measure as a "mad project" for America would not be able to cope with the Mistress of the Seas. Besides such privateering would corrupt the character and morals of American seamen. By a small majority, however, Congress ordered Washington to use the armed vessels of Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Rhode Island at continental risk and pay in order to capture these two transports and any others laden with military supplies. 17 Within a short time several valuable prizes were taken and much needed arms and ammunition was obtained.

Already on October 3, the delegates of Rhode Island laid before Congress a recommendation for the building of a fleet at continental expense. Ten days later Congress decided to fit out two armed vessels for the interception of British transports and appointed a committee of three to carry out this measure. By October 30, this committee had prepared an estimate of the cost of these two vessels. Congress then enlarged the committee by appointing four new members including John Adams and ordered two more armed vessels to be "fitted out with all expedition." 18 This naval committee, as it was called, immediately rented a room and agreed to meet every evening at six o'clock. Adams later remarked that the meetings of this committee were the most pleasant hours of labor that he spent in Congress. Richard Henry Lee and Christopher Gadsden were sensible and cheerful men, and the aged Stephen Hopkins was experienced in naval affairs and a good entertainer after the work of the evening was finished. The conversation sparkling with wit and learning often continued until
With all his interest in the new navy, John Adams lacked knowledge of maritime affairs even in his own province. Consequently, he continually sought information about the number of seamen available for service, about men qualified to act as officers, and about ships suitable for the continental service.

Business and pleasure mixed well, for the naval committee soon purchased, fitted out, and officered four vessels, the Alfred, the Columbus, the Cabot, and the Andrew Doria. These ships, fitted out to capture British transports, were the beginning of the American navy.

In December 1775, Congress, acting on Rhode Island's suggestion to build an American fleet, finally resolved to construct thirteen warships. John Adams believed that an American fleet would be able to destroy small fleets of the British navy, or at least force England to the additional expense of using convoys. Yet, when the recommendation was first made in Congress in October, there was much opposition. Many members, considering the great cost of ship construction, objected that an American fleet would protect only the trade of New England and not that of southern colonies, for Virginia and Maryland had few ships of their own. They pointed out that a strong British fleet posted at the entrance of Delaware or Chesapeake Bay could easily obstruct the trade of Pennsylvania or Virginia. But, after two months, the opposition decreased, and Congress provided for the construction of a fleet by appointing a committee of thirteen members, one from
each colony. This new committee, usually called the marine committee, absorbed the functions of the naval committee early in 1776.

Although John Adams was no longer actively engaged on a committee concerned with naval affairs, he never lost his keen interest in the navy. Often he was dissatisfied with the way the marine committee conducted its business. If the board of war had not occupied his mornings and evenings, he would have, he told James Warren, put the marine department into respectable order. All that was needed was a reliable person to assemble the committee twice each day and to direct their attention to business. He recalled that the naval committee on which he had served had performed its functions with vigor and dispatch and had not caused complaints as its successor did. In 1777 Adams' motion that a naval board be established at Boston was approved by Congress. He wrote to James Warren, one of the members of this board, that he almost envied him the honor of being "so capitally concerned in laying the foundations of a great navy." Adams was most delighted by the opportunity to serve on the naval board; but he was most reluctant to be a member of the committee sent to confer with Lord Howe. Early in September 1776, Congress received a message from Lord Howe, commander-in-chief of the British army at New York, that he desired a short conversation with some members of Congress in their private capacities. For several days Congress debated whether notice should be taken
of the message. Members who desired to comply with Howe's wish argued that a delay of military operations most helpful to America might result from the meeting. Such a meeting, they argued, would throw the odium of the war's continuance on Howe and hence silence the Tories. The liberal party, who had just succeeded in securing a declaration of independence two months previously, could not believe that Howe offered anything but complete submission to Parliament as terms of peace. From the beginning, John Adams was decidedly against the proposed meeting, for he considered it a decoy to lure Congress into an embarrassing situation.

Congress, however, resolved that since it was improper to appoint members to confer with Howe in a private capacity, a committee should visit him to learn what powers he had to treat of peace and what proposals he could make. Benjamin Franklin and John Adams were unanimously elected to this committee; Edward Rutledge was chosen as the third member. When Adams asked to be excused, Congress deferred the consideration of his request until the next day. Meanwhile, opponents of the measure urged him to accept in order that the meeting might result in as little evil as possible. Because of the "pressing solicitation of the firmest men in Congress" and the "unanimous vote," he finally accepted the trust. The proponents of the meeting had agreed to vote for him in order to induce reluctant members to support the measure.

On Staten Island the three commissioners conferred with Lord Howe for several hours. Assuring the Americans of his great
desire for peace, Howe informed them that he was empowered to confer with private gentlemen on the question of restoring peace, but not with a committee of Congress. Since they desired to hear his proposals, the Americans told Howe to consider the commissioners in whatever light he wished, so long as they might consider themselves as members of an assembly representing free and independent states. Thereupon, Howe proposed that the colonies submit with the assurance of George III's good dispositions to redress American grievances and revise offensive acts of Parliament. The Americans replied that since all the colonies had after long deliberation declared their independence, Congress lacked the power of reducing them again to the state of dependence.

After the meeting, the committee reported to Congress the scope of Howe's authority. He could grant pardons upon submission to all except the few designated leaders of the American cause and could confer with private persons about grievances, acts of Parliament, and instructions to colonial governors which had excited the colonies to rebellion. If the colonies submitted, Parliament might or might not at its pleasure correct the wrongs the Americans complained of. Few in the colonies were willing to hazard everything on the reported good dispositions of George III and Parliament. John Adams had remarked to Lord Howe that the Americans after enduring sacrifices and hard struggles in the cause of freedom, would not readily submit to a gov-
ernment which, because of this revolution, would naturally distrust them. Consequently, Adams was confident that this interview with Lord Howe would not harm the cause of American independence. In later years he was to learn that his name had been on the list of those whom Lord Howe had been instructed not to pardon even if the colonies submitted to Great Britain.

To consider all the ninety committees of which Adams was a member would serve no purpose, but two interesting incidents are worthy of mention. Late one evening in 1775 the news of the battle at Charleston reached Philadelphia. Informed of the dire need of powder in Massachusetts, John Hancock, Samuel Adams, and John Adams walked the streets at one o’clock in the morning in search of the members of the Philadelphia Committee of Safety. At length they found some of them, who full of sympathy for “their brave Brethren” in Massachusetts assured Hancock and the two Adamses that a supply of powder would be on its way before dawn.

One of the American commissioners in Paris had suggested that Congress send American curiosities across the Atlantic as presents to the Parisian ladies. A little token of friendship and little attentions shown to the ladies might help to win the sympathy and support of France. Unwilling to leave any stone unturned, the members of Congress pondered on the question and thought of “mooses, wood-ducks, flying squirrels, red-winged blackbirds, cranberries, and rattlesnakes” among other things.
To his wife John Adams remarked, "Is not this a pretty employment for great statesmen as we think ourselves to be?" Yet believing this seemingly frivolous matter might be of some consequence, he requested his wife to suggest what she thought Parisian ladies might like. 30
NOTES TO CHAPTER V


7. Hewes to Johnston, July 8, 1776, Ibid., II. p.4.

8. Hooper to Hewes, Nov. 8, 1776, Ibid., II. p.146.


CHAPTER VI

THE CHARACTER OF JOHN ADAMS

In his Diary John Adams admitted, "Vanity ... is my cardinal vice and cardinal folly." He professed, too, his resolve to "conquer my natural pride and self-conceit" and to acquire "meekness and humility." Again, he censured himself for his "puffy, vain, conceited conversation." No accomplishments or virtues, he wrote, sufficiently attone "for vanity and a haughty overbearing temper in conversation." Rather, the nobler and more virtuous is a man, the more derision, contempt, and ridicule falls to his vanity.

Thus, at twenty years of age, in 1756, John Adams was conscious of his predominant fault, and it was probably due to this consciousness that he succeeded in checking its growth for a time. Certainly during the period of the Revolution, vanity did not mar his character to any great extent. At that time he was achieving real greatness and was too busy to follow his natural tendency to self-flattery.

He did not, however, entirely conquer his vanity, for later in his public career, this petty vice asserted itself more noticeably. After his years of public service had suddenly been cut short by the breakup in the Federalist Party which sent Adams back to Braintree a broken and disappointed man, he could dream
about the great services he had rendered the young nation at the
time of the Revolution. He boasted of his important part in the
appointment of Washington and in the laying of the foundation of
the American navy; he claimed a great share in the furthering of
the cause of independence and in defending the Declaration of In-
dependence on the floor of Congress; he asserted that he had "un-
questionably" done more work on committees than any other member
of Congress. Truly John Adams deserved well of the American peo-
ple, but his praise would have sounded far better on another's
lips.

Very likely Adams would not have been so generally accused
of vanity had he kept his innermost thoughts to himself. Natur-
ally, his Diary and intimate letters were not intended for the
eyes of the world. For his Autobiography there was less excuse.
In 1805, when he was nearly seventy years old, Adams began to com-
pile his memoirs as a justification of his past conduct which had
been so severely criticized under stress of political conflict.
This work he never finished, because, as he remarked, he could not
endure "so dull an employment." In his own eyes he appeared "so
much like a small boy" that with all his vanity he could not bear
the sight of the picture he was drawing of himself. 2

Perhaps John Adams' attitude toward his own vanity is well
illustrated by his advice to Benjamin Rush. He urged Dr. Rush to
communicate to his close friends all the compliments he had re-
ceived from Europe and not to fear the charge of vanity, because
every virtuous and honest man must combat the enemy, Envy. All men, Adams claimed, have an "equal degree" of vanity, but "Honest men do not always disguise it." When "a man pique(s) himself upon his modesty, you may depend upon it, he is as vain a fellow as lives." At the same time, however, Adams reminded Dr. Rush that there is a quality called modesty, and every man ought to avoid disgusting others by "any ostentatious display" of self-love. Since Adams was far more opposed by intriguing men than Benjamin Rush, this advice was in a sense a self-justification.

Closely akin to John Adams' vanity was his jealousy. He might pride himself on his great share in promoting the cause of independence on the floor of Congress in 1775-6, but oftentimes he apparently failed to appreciate the importance of maintaining independence by force of arms. Of course, he realized that the mere words of a declaration would not frighten Great Britain into allowing the colonies to escape from her dominion without a struggle. He knew that the Declaration of Independence was only the beginning of what would prove to be a long and bloody conflict. But unfortunately Adams did not properly balance Washington's services on the battlefield and in Valley Forge with his own on the floor of Congress. Of what value would the passage of the Declaration of Independence have been had not Washington vindicated in battle what that document merely asserted? Yet, Adams never could understand why the American people constantly gave Washington a preeminence above all others. He did not realize
that Washington was absolutely essential to the cause of American freedom, while he himself was relatively unimportant. Without John Adams the colonies would have eventually declared independence. Of this there is little doubt. Without Washington one might readily doubt whether the colonies would have successfully maintained the Revolution against England. But vain John Adams was never content to take a place in the background, however prominent it might be, even though the foreground of the scene was dominated by the solitary figure of the great, noble, disinterested character, George Washington.

As an old man, John Adams observed with some disappointment that "eloquence in public assemblies is not the surest road to fame." Consider George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, and Thomas Jefferson. All of these men were reserved and silent in public. Yet how highly they were respected and honored. John Adams had spent hours on the floor of Congress leading the debate, but he had fallen into disfavor. A public speaker, by justifying his own measures and answering the arguments of his opponents, unavoidably creates for himself many enemies.

A man, more than usually jealous and vain, comes to feel that he is not being adequately appreciated. Suspicions about his fellowmen arise in his mind. He feels that they are not giving him due consideration, even deliberately slighting him and trying to oppose his every venture. By some such psychological process, John Adams' vanity and jealousy effected a persecution complex
with all its undesirable defense mechanism. Especially his break with Hamilton began a sad chapter in Adams' life wherein the feeling of being persecuted was accentuated. Looking back to the time of the Revolution, Adams believed that even then men had deliberately opposed him. True, the policies he advocated led the Quakers and proprietary gentlemen in Pennsylvania to dislike him, but John Adams believed that they continued to persecute him even after he had retired to private life. The defense of Captain Preston and the British soldiers, indited on account of the unfortunate Boston Massacre, was later brought up to show Adams' sympathy for England. At the age of seventy he was still complaining about the imputation of sinister motives given to his actions. The old man of sixty-five lamented the praise of Federalists and Republicans for the "disinterested patriotism" of Washington and Franklin, while they thought him "the meanest villain in the world." In his Autobiography, Adams expressed his suspicions that the letter of thanks written to Washington for securing the evacuation of General Howe from Boston had been designedly omitted from the Journals to avoid paying a compliment to the man who made that motion and to the committee that had composed the letter. Does not such suspicion indicate a persecution complex?

This same narrowness of view found expression in Adams' bigotry which is unfortunately attested by too many examples in his writings. One Sunday afternoon in Philadelphia, he attended the "Romish chapel," "mother church, or rather ... grandmother church."
With "the poor wretches fingering their beads, chanting Latin not a word of which they understand," he had little sympathy. He could not understand "their crossing themselves perpetually ... their bowings and kneelings and genuflections before the altar."
The richness of the vestments and altar pieces, the lighted candles, the sweet and exquisite chanting, the bells, the gold and silver, the large painting of the crucified Savior above the altar were all so calculated to "charm and bewitch the simple and ignorant" that Adams wondered how the Reformation had succeeded.

But not in religion alone did Adams fail to grasp a concept broader than his own small introverted mind. Even on his first journey southward, he found much to censure and little to praise in New York and Philadelphia. In his eyes these two towns were much inferior to Boston. Prejudice discovered that the opulence and splendor of these towns had been bought at a high price, for the Bostonians excelled their neighbors to the south in good manners, breeding, tastes, morals, religion, and education. By spending his early life entirely in the vicinity of Boston, John Adams had acquired a provincialism which he never completely outgrew. At another time, Adams eulogized Massachusetts gentlemen, "In solid abilities and real virtues they vastly excel, in general, any people upon the continent." He admitted that they lacked art, address, knowledge of the world, "the exterior and superficial accomplishments of gentlemen." He criticized New England people as "awkward and bashful, yet ... pert, ostentatious, and
vain; a mixture which excites ridicule and gives disgust." This was a rather accurate self-portrait by John Adams who, inexperienced in the world, was surely vain and pert. These deficiencies Adams prescribed had to be remedied by intercourse with the world, for (mirabile dictu!) "New England must produce the heroes, the statesmen, the philosophers" of America for some time. In another letter to his wife, after openly confessing his "local attachment," his "overweening prejudice in favor of New England, which ... sometimes leads me to expose myself to just ridicule," he continued by enumerating reasons why the colonies of New England excel every other colony in America. Besides the customs and institutions peculiar to New England, Adams gave as a reason for the Yankee excellence, their purer English blood. Such a reason only brings his prejudice to light.

From all thus far observed about John Adams' character, one might conclude that he was not a very sociable statesman. He himself remarked that he was not interested in "Balls, assemblies, concerts, cards, horses, dogs." He was not happy in a crowd but preferred to be engaged in business. His only pleasures were intimate unreserved conversation with a few bosom friends and the perusal of books, so that while in Philadelphia, he was perforce something of a recluse, and his entertainment was confined to correspondence with his friends far away in Massachusetts.

Serious though his faults may seem at a superficial glance, nevertheless, beneath those faults was a sterling patriotic devo-
ition which his most ardent detractors must admire. No love of the public stage induced him to endure the onerous post of delegate in Philadelphia. He felt that he was wanting in the necessary "fortune, leisure, health," and "genius" for public life; yet, while the ship of state was being buffeted by heavy storms, he helped man the pumps, and tried to fill the dangerous posts few would accept. When the ship of state was enjoying a peaceful calm and men were anxious to plot her serene course, he preferred to disembark and care for his private concerns.¹²

Already in December 1775, he hoped that he would not be renominated, for he did not wish to serve another term "at least until other gentlemen had taken their turns."¹³ A few men, he felt, were not obliged to sacrifice themselves, their families, the pleasures and profits of life, while others enjoyed themselves and accumulated wealth. By July 1776 he was weary of the "incessant round of thinking and speaking on the greatest subjects."¹⁴ He begged the General Court appoint nine members in all, so that only three or five would be obliged to attend Congress at one time. He wished to resign because of failing health and great fatigue due to the incessant work at the Congress. His private affairs, moreover, were not in the best condition. After all, he reasoned, there was no further need for him to sacrifice himself for the common good. That part of the Congress' business for which he was qualified was nearly completed; to conduct the military and commercial affairs that remained, others in Massa-
chusetts were far better qualified. He complained that the ordeal in Philadelphia was more trying because John Treat Paine and Samuel Adams, the other delegates from Massachusetts at this time, were seriously ill. Adams himself needed rest badly, he thought; and he threatened to return home for a six months rest even if he left Massachusetts unrepresented. Already he had strained his constitution beyond the bounds of prudence and safety. To sit day after day in Congress was too much of a strain for any man. He desired a permanent release from duty, but he would willingly serve in the future provided he were granted a respite every three or six months or at least be allowed to bring his wife and four children with him to Philadelphia.

Repeatedly in letters to his wife, John Adams expressed his fears for his health. Constant attendance at Congress and committees with practically no bodily exercise was sufficient, he believed, to wear down a man more robust than he. Perhaps he exaggerated the danger to his health; perhaps his fears were excessive. Yet, as long as any strength remained, he intended to discharge his duties in Congress, believing that his "health and life ought to be hazarded in the cause" of his country.

John Adams constantly longed to exchange the smoke and noise of Philadelphia, public contentions, and the intrigues of politics for the domestic felicity of his farm in Massachusetts. In spring he found his stay doubly wearisome. He longed to wander through his own meadows, to ramble over his own hills, and to
sit in solitude by the side of his brook. He began to suspect that he had "not much of the grand in my composition." He was not at all charmed by the pomp and pride of war and "the sound of drums and fifes." Even dominion of the world seemed as nothing in comparison with "the delights of a garden." But he generously sacrificed such private interests and pleasures for the happiness and good of others. Surely his patriotism and his sense of duty outshine any petty vanity this self-sacrificing statesman may have felt.

Domestic worries and troubles accentuated Adams' unhappy days at Philadelphia. Bad news frequently came from Braintree. In 1775, Abigail Adams wrote that the epidemic had spread from the camp at Charleston through the neighboring villages. At one time her children and nearly her whole household had been sick. Death visited her friends, servants, and relatives, even her mother. Such days were anxious ones for a husband four hundred miles distant, unable to assist his loved ones. Moreover, Abigail lived in constant dread that General Gage would attack the seacoast towns and drive the inhabitants to the hills. Even though she was not driven from her home, she was distressed by the roar of cannon that caused her house to shake and the windows to rattle. One night she could not rest, for her "heart beat pace" with the continued firing of cannon. Naturally John Adams suffered when he read such news and confessed that the sound of cannon seemed more terrible at four hundred miles distance than at Braintree.
Other distressing news from home reached Philadelphia; for weeks Abigail was worried about rumors that her husband had been poisoned, and that all communication between New England and Philadelphia had been cut off.

The best indication that John Adams served his country with an unselfish patriotic heart is the poor recompense he received for his dangerous service as a delegate. The colony of Massachusetts paid his expenses and little more. He claimed that all the rewards for his four years' service in Congress were insufficient to pay wages to one laboring man on his farm. Indeed, by 1777, after four years at Philadelphia, Adams' financial condition was in a sorry plight. Adding to his embarrassment, the Continental paper money was depreciating in value; prices were more than double what they had been before the war. Indeed, the Adams family was living on John's moderate acquisitions in the past, the fruit of years of saving. Meanwhile, Adams could not without some regret notice that his fellow lawyers in Boston were making fortunes. Chiefly because of the prizes brought into the port of Boston, the law profession was more lucrative than ever before. Even young men, who a few years previously had served as clerks in John Adams' office, were now growing rich. To persevere in public life under such inequality required sound philosophical principles and a strong sense of patriotic duty.22

Adams felt most the hardships and sacrifices he was bringing upon his family. Too long had he neglected the education and
interests of his children. He feared they would grow up in real want, which, coupled to pride, would make a very unhappy combination. Yet, if his children reproached him for having neglected them, he was determined to tell them that he had labored to secure a free constitution. If they did not prefer liberty to an ample fortune, he would disown them. Such sacrifice and devotion to one's country can hardly be construed as anything but virtue. When his country's interests were at stake, John Adams had little thought for himself.

To John Adams' wife, Abigail, rightly belongs a large share of the credit due her husband's generous response to duty. In his Autobiography John Adams mentions that the Quakers had intimidated John Dickinson's wife and mother, who, fearful lest Dickinson would be hanged and his estate confiscated if he supported independence, remonstrated with him. How could he risk leaving his wife a poor widow and his children orphans and beggars? John Adams added that he truly pitied Dickinson, for he knew that such remonstrances from Abigail would have also unmaned him or at least have made him the most miserable man alive. Abigail, however, was willing to sacrifice "all domestic pleasures and enjoyments" to "the great and important duty" her husband owed their country. Her sacrifice was to endure the painful separation from her husband and to labor doubly hard in the management of the farm and in the care of the children. Unquestionably this moral support gave Abigail a perfect right to rejoice
that her husband had "the honor of being a principle actor in laying a foundation" for the future greatness of the country. A wife like Abigail was a blessing indeed to a statesman like John Adams.

In an estimate of the character of John Adams, a few weaknesses seem to overshadow the magnanimity of the man, only because shortcomings always stand out far more prominently in a great man. Certainly few will begrudge this statesman the pleasant luxury of indulgence in a bit of self-praise when they view the man in his entirety, unselfishly sacrificing all the personal pleasures of fortune, profession, and family life to serve the common good. To see John Adams thus is to understand and appreciate his fervent apostrophe:

Posterity! you will never know how much it cost the present generation to preserve your freedom! I hope you will make a good use of it. If you do not, I shall repent it in heaven that I ever took half the pains to preserve it.
NOTES TO CHAPTER VI

   Diary, May 3, 1756, Ibid., II. p.16. Diary, July 25, 1756, 
   Ibid., II. p.25.


8. J. Adams to Abigail Adams, Oct. 9, 1774, in Familiar Letters, 
   p.46-7. Diary, Oct. 9, 1774, in The Works of John Adams, 
   II. p.395.

9. Diary, Aug. 23, 1774, Ibid., II. p.353. Diary, Oct. 9, 1774, 
   Ibid., II. p.395.

10. J. Adams to Abigail Adams, Aug. 3, 1776, in Familiar Letters, 
    p.207. J. Adams to Abigail Adams, Oct. 29, 1775, Ibid., 
    p.120.

    Adams, IX. p.368-9. J. Adams to Abigail Adams, Aug. 18, 
    1776, in Familiar Letters, p.215.

    Adams, IX. p.355.

13. J. Adams to Abigail Adams, Dec. 3, 1775, in Familiar Letters, 
    p.127.

14. J. Adams to Lowell, June 12, 1776, in The Works of John Adams, 
    IX. p.393.

15. J. Adams to the Deputy Secretary of Massachusetts, July 25, 
    1776, Ibid., IX. p.426-7. J. Adams to Abigail Adams, July 


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