

# Center *for the Study of the* American Constitution

## No. 1: John Adams 1735-1826

John Adams was arguably one of the five most important figures in the Revolutionary era. During the 1760s he was among the very few who anticipated and desired independence from Great Britain. One of the leading figures in the First and Second Continental congresses, Adams was described by his Virginia colleague Thomas Jefferson as “our Colossus on the floor.” He assisted Jefferson in writing and he signed the Declaration of Independence. He wrote *Thoughts on Government*, a pamphlet advocating the creation of state constitutions that provided balanced governments as opposed to constitutions that would create overly-democratic governments advocated by Thomas Paine and Benjamin Franklin. Adams served abroad as a commissioner to draft treaties with European and North African countries, a peace commissioner ending the war with Britain, and as U.S. minister to both The Netherlands and Britain. On a brief visit back to Massachusetts in 1779, he served in the state constitutional convention and was the primary author of the Massachusetts constitution of 1780. When he returned from Europe in June 1788, he supported the newly-proposed U.S. Constitution. He served eight years as U.S. Vice President under George Washington and then four years as President. Although he did not attend the Constitutional Convention of 1787 because of his diplomatic mission in London, Adams’s spirit was present in Philadelphia because of his writings. He also helped to implement the new Constitution while serving as president of the U.S. Senate by breaking more tie votes on a wide range of issues with his “casting vote” than any other Vice President in U.S. history. ■

### **John Adams to Robert Treat Paine, Braintree, December 6, 1759**

I cannot think it either Vanity or Virtue to acknowledge, that the Acquisition and Communication of Knowledge, are the sole Entertainment of my Life.

### **John Adams to Abigail Adams, Philadelphia, August 18, 1776**

There are very few People in this World with whom I can bear to converse. I can treat all with Decency and Civility, and converse with them, when it is necessary, on Points of Business. But I am never happy in their Company. This has made me a Recluse, and will one day, make me an Hermit.

### **John Adams to William McCreery, Passy, September 25, 1778**

I have never been used to disguise my sentiments of Men, whom I have been against, in public Life. . . . and never was a man of importance enough, to make me deviate from a Rule that I have observed all my Life, vizt. when obliged to be a Man’s Enemy to be openly and generously so.

### **Comte de Vergennes to Chevalier de la Luzerne, Versailles, August 7, 1780**

[John Adams will be a bad diplomat] because he has an inflexibility, a pedantry, an arrogance, and a conceit that renders him incapable of dealing with political subjects, and especially of handling them with the representatives of great powers, who assuredly will not yield either to the tone or to the logic of Mr. Adams.

### **Benjamin Franklin to Robert R. Livingston, Passy, July 22, 1783**

I am persuaded, however, that he means well for his Country, is always an honest Man, often a wise one, but sometimes, and in some things, absolutely out of his senses.

**Thomas Jefferson to James Madison, Paris, January 30, 1787**

A 7 months intimacy with him here and as many weeks in London have given me opportunities of studying him closely. He is vain, irritable and a bad calculator of the force and probable effect of the motives which govern men. This is all the ill which can possibly be said of him. He is as disinterested as the being which made him: he is profound in his views: and accurate in his judgment except where knowledge of the world is necessary to form a judgment. He is so amiable, that I pronounce you will love him if ever you become acquainted with him. He would be, as he was, a great man in Congress.

**Abigail Adams to Mary Cranch, Richmond Hill, New York City, August 9, 1789**

. . . his Rule through life has been to vote and act, independent of Party agreeable to the dictates of his conscience.

**Alexander Hamilton to Charles Cotesworth Pinckney, Philadelphia, October 10, 1792**

Mr. Adams, whatever objections may be against some of his theoretic opinions, is a firm honest independent politician.

**John Adams to Abigail Adams, Philadelphia, December 30, 1796**

I think a Man had better wear than rust.

**Oliver Wolcott, Sr. to Oliver Wolcott, Jr., March 20, 1797**

We have done the best we could in our [presidential] election. We have chosen a very honest man, a friend to order and to our national independence and honor; but that you may know that I am not mistaken, I will for once, under a strong seal, venture to tell you that I always considered Mr. Adams a man of great vanity, pretty capricious, of a very moderate share of prudence, and of far less real abilities than he believes he possesses. I therefore sincerely wish he may have able counsellors, in whom he will confide; though, as he will not be influenced but by an apparent compliment to his own understanding, it will require a deal of address to render him the service which it will be essential for him to receive.

**Alexander Hamilton to Charles Carroll of Carrollton, New York, August 7, 1800**

Mr. Adams has governed & must govern from *impulse* and *caprice*, under the influence of the two most mischievous of Passions for a Politician, to an extreme that to be portrayed would present a caricature—*Vanity* and *Jealousy*. He has already disorganized & in a great measure prostrated the Federal Party.

**Thomas Jefferson to Benjamin Rush, Monticello, January 16, 1811**

I think it part of his character to suspect foul play in those of whom he is jealous, and not easily to relinquish his suspicions.

**Benjamin Rush to John Adams, Philadelphia, February 17, 1812**

I rejoice in the correspondence which has taken place between you and your old friend Mr. Jefferson. I consider you and him as the North and South Poles of the American Revolution. Some talked, some wrote, and some fought to promote and establish it, but you and Mr. Jefferson *thought* for us all. I never take a retrospect of the years 1775 and 1776 without associating your opinions and speeches and conversations with all the great political, moral, and intellectual achievements of the Congresses of those memorable years.

**Thomas Jefferson: Conversation with Daniel Webster, 1824**

John Adams was our Colossus on the floor. He was not graceful, nor elegant, nor remarkably fluent; but he came out occasionally with a power of thought & expression, that moved us from our seats. ■

