Federalist Chic

The late-breaking beatification of John Adams and his family, soon to be a major monument, forms one of the wonders of the present age. As David McCullough's mammoth biography of Adams continues to ride the bestseller lists, the second president's visage is on display and his merits are being extolled across the land, and in places that Adams could never have imagined: airport gift shops, radio talk shows, the aisles of Target, even holiday gatherings in the suburbs of Kansas City. Adams has not seen this kind of popularity for more than two hundred years, since the XYZ affair was headline news (if there had been headlines) and the song "Adams and Liberty" was leading the hit parade (if there had been a hit parade). Even more remarkable is the fact that the drive to immortalize the Adams family in stone is being co-led by a liberal Irish Catholic Democrat (Ted Kennedy), the type of man that the conservative John Adams administration tried to have thrown in jail or out of the country. Or both.

Illustration © John McCoy

Though long popular with historians for the wonderfully honest, acerbic, and introspective sources they left behind in their letters and diaries, the Adamses are tough to feature as twenty-first-century icons, especially when one considers the elder John's post-independence career. David McCullough claimed in a *New York Times* profile that "so much of what [Adams] wrote dealt with the ideas and ideals that are the basis of our whole way of life; of our society as Americans." That Adams played a powerful role in bringing about independence is

true—our lack of maple leaves on the flag and freeways named after the queen owe as much to Adams as to anybody. But the political content of the new republic that the Revolution created, and of the popular aspirations that were unleashed, pretty well eluded Adams. While his fellow Americans thrilled to the democratic, egalitarian message of Paine's *Common Sense*, Adams sat down to write a rebuttal. After the Revolution, Adams spent most of his time on what would come to be seen as the wrong side of history, railing *against* the "ideas and ideals" that became the basis of American life and politics. And with one huge exception, his breaking with hardline Federalists to avoid a war with France, he did not exactly cover himself with glory as a leader either.

As vice president, Adams was a laughingstock who was invited to two or three Cabinet meetings (tops) in eight years, and became best known for his wordy and poorly received arguments for extending various aspects of Europe's more hierarchical political culture to the United States. Taking an increasingly dark view of popular morals and capacities as he got older, Adams proposed and defended ideas that mercifully did not become part of the American political tradition: royal titles and life tenures for senators and chief executives, the open maintenance of an aristocracy. (He was also a vociferous, and unlike Jefferson, sincere and committed, opponent of political parties and campaigning, developments that *did* become part of our political tradition.) Adams was even willing to consider the idea of calling the chief executive a king. And while he usually seemed willing to leave his aristocracy "natural," elective, and relatively meritocratic, the last of his "Discourses on Davila" (the newspaper essay series that precipitated the break with Thomas Jefferson), opined that "hereditary succession was attended with fewer evils than frequent elections."

While not the "avowed monarchist" of Jeffersonian propaganda, Adams did call the English constitution "the most stupendous fabric of human invention" (an often-parodied turn of phrase in its day) and hewed to older political ideas that most of his fellow Americans were abandoning or repudiating. Believing that a proper republican constitution should balance different orders of society—the monarch, the aristocracy, and the people—rather than just institutions of government, Adams worried that American constitutions did not have enough of the good stuff, being too heavily skewed toward democracy. He believed it was far better to err in the other direction: the people were "as unjust, tyrannical, brutal, barbarous, and cruel, as any king or senate," and more prone to "intemperance and excess." Democracy without aristocratic power to keep it in check would lead to "profligacy, vice, and corruption," while the reverse would be merely unjust, without public order and morals being threatened. As president, the long-time advocate of strong executive power acted with characteristic perversity by refusing to use any in managing his own administration. Adams retained the Washington Cabinet for years despite the fact that they held him in relatively open contempt and consistently flouted or subverted his orders. Yet at the same time, the Adams administration seized some executive powers that were stronger than any before or since. One of the few areas where Adams and his Cabinet agreed was in the promulgation of what

remains—if only barely—the nation's only peacetime sedition law, one that was openly intended to suppress and silence a nascent opposition party. The Sedition Act was coupled with the nation's first crackdown on politically suspicious immigrants—people from such deeply alien places as England, Ireland, and Scotland—in a case where the dangers they posed to American liberty were much more theoretical than they are in the case of today's Osamists. Adams sometimes seemed to shy away from the Alien and Sedition Acts, but he signed them, and was not sorry to see his detractors suffer. (His wife and memorial-mate Abigail was positively eager for it.) Whatever his other virtues, John Adams stands out rather boldly in our history as the only president not dealing with armed rebellion who got to have his critics in the press arrested, jailed, or driven into hiding. Many others, from Washington to Nixon to Clinton, would have enjoyed similar privileges, but forbore seeking them.

As little sense as it seems to make, the origins of the Adams craze are not mysterious. It is a by-product of the celebrity culture that is coming to dominate American history publishing as thoroughly as it does most other aspects of our society. Celebrity historian David McCullough cast his gaze on Adams, and "His Rotundity" suddenly became both a national hero and corporate profit center. With his PBS-ready voice and grandpa-with-gravitas demeanor (sort of a cross between John Houseman and Matlock), McCullough is exactly what television producers and popular audiences want their historians to look and sound like. People love him, especially college-educated people who feel like they should have paid more attention in that freshman survey class now that they are older and more serious. (This means the McCullough fan base is especially well represented in the media and politics.) Ted Kennedy rushed up to get the national treasure's autograph after a congressional hearing, quipping that he could "grovel with the best of them." McCullough matches his genially distinguished persona with exactly consonant subjects and writing style: great men and events that most people have heard of, described in lively, human, but stately prose that tastes full-bodied but goes down smooth. After his bestselling paean to Harry Truman and heavy exposure on television and the distinguished lecture circuit, McCullough could probably have inspired a monument to the Millard Fillmore family if he had chosen differently. As it was, McCullough turned his sights to the second president, deciding that Adams was "unfairly maligned"—this despite the many usually admiring biographies and exegeses that scholars have produced over the years.

The terms of the reinterpretation that McCullough offers are very revealing of the narrowness of his intellectual compass. Chiefly, McCullough seems to have been concerned with the charge (lodged by Adams himself) that he was an obnoxious man. Not so, says the biographer: Adams was "full of life, high-spirited, affectionate, loyal to friends, a kind and a dedicated father and husband." Abigail liked him and so should we. A contributor to the pompously reductionist PBS program and tie-in book series on political leadership, *Character Above All*, McCullough seems to ask only one real question about his subjects: was he a good, likable, morally virtuous person? This is dressed up with some rhetoric about the importance of the subject's political

career. Yet in practice any defects in the public career are explained away by the good intentions and sterling qualities of the private man. Or they are left vague, or left out.

McCullough leaves Adams's views so vague, in fact, that our present Congress seems to think he was Jefferson. The Adams memorial legislation that had Ted Kennedy groveling actually mentions the honorees' "abiding belief in the perfectibility of the Nation's democracy" as one of the justifications for memorializing the Adams family. The breathtaking counterfactuality of this argument is compounded by the fact that the new monument will also include not only Sedition Act John, but also his son John Quincy Adams, the president whose commitment to perfecting democracy was so strong that he told Congress not to be "palsied by the will of [their] constituents," and their descendant Henry Adams, author of *The Degradation of the Democratic Dogma*.

McCullough and Kennedy fail to realize that there was a reason for earlier generations of leaders not turning the Adamses into monuments of democracy: earlier generations of leaders actually *understood* the Adamses. Our own willful failure to do so suggests that there may be more at work here than historical ignorance and star power.

Especially among our political, business, and media elites, genuine feeling for democracy seems to have ebbed very low, while comfort levels with autocracy, inequality, and concentrated power seem to be rather high. Corporate CEOs, essentially princes wielding absolute power in their realms, have emerged as cultural heroes, while each successive president (Jimmy Carter excepted) has gotten a little bit better at playing the role of elective monarch. During the 2000 election crisis, it seemed that media commentators and citizens who were genuinely alarmed at the possibility of the people's will not being done were drowned out by throngs who just wanted a decision made, to see an "endgame," as the appropriately dynastic buzzword had it.

Upon close inspection, the current vogue for the Founders is politically right-handed, heavily favoring the conservatives of the founding era, figures such as Adams, Hamilton, and Washington who stood against or above the rise of democratic politics and the further expansion of individual rights. "Founders chic," as Newsweek called the phenomenon last summer, is really "Federalist chic." Since then, even long before September 11, the political restraints one might have expected to limit a court-ordered president rejected by a majority of voters nationwide have simply not existed. (Approval ratings based on a few hundred phone calls seem to be given more democratic weight than millions of votes.) Likewise there has been only a little more outcry, and no serious congressional resistance, as President Bush and his retainers have seized police powers not seen since World War II and claimed sweeping wartime exemptions from public scrutiny and criticism of their actions all without the need of, say, a major, declared war involving millions of Americans against genocidal modern states. That such world-war-like authority has been so easily taken speaks depressing volumes about the health of our political system. So

John Adams may be a man for our times after all. The democratic tradition that swamped him and his son is not what it used to be.

Further Reading:

For additional, late-breaking comments on this and other historical-political topics, see "Publick Occurrences Extra."

The Adams craze was only part of a larger boom in celebratory ruminations on the Founders, dubbed "Founder chic" by *Newsweek*. (For a time this fall, it even threatened to extend to Adams's archenemy Alexander Hamilton.) The boom gained prominent coverage in national publications during 2000 and 2001, and was slowed only a little by September 11 and the Joseph Ellis scandal. At least two forceful critiques of the trend have appeared: Sean Wilentz's *New Republic* review of McCullough's *Adams*, "America Made Easy"; and Andrew Burstein's article, "The Politics of Memory: Taking the measure of the ever more popular demand for historical greatness," *Washington Post Book World*, 14 October 2001.

David McCullough's conviction that John Adams has somehow been neglected by historians is one the strangest aspects of the craze. In fact, there are numerous admiring, well-written Adams books by historians, and they all do a more thorough and even-handed job than McCullough of analyzing Adams's political ideas and career, without stinting on the love. For just a selection, see John Ferling, *John Adams: A Life* (New York, 1996); Joseph J. Ellis, *Passionate Sage: The Character and Legacy of John Adams* (New York, 1993); Peter Shaw, *The Character of John Adams* (Chapel Hill, 1976). Middlebrow pop culture has not left Adams behind either. While depicted as priggish and difficult, he is clearly the hero of the popular musical *1776*. Those readers old enough to remember the Bicentennial may also recall the PBS miniseries of that time, *The Adams Chronicles*, the tie-in book for which is still pretty widely available in used book stores.

Perhaps the most unfortunate aspect of the journalistic accounts of "Founder chic" is the degree to which it has been mistaken for a dominant trend in historical scholarship (as opposed to historical publishing), the essence of a new "new political history." While there is now a fairly substantial group of early American historians working in political history again, the thrust of this work is quite different, as I hope will be demonstrated by the forthcoming volume I am co-editing with David Waldstreicher and Andrew Robertson, *Beyond the Founders: New Approaches to the Political History of the Early American Republic* (University of North Carolina Press). No one ever said that pundits had to be objective!

This article originally appeared in issue 2.2 (January, 2002).