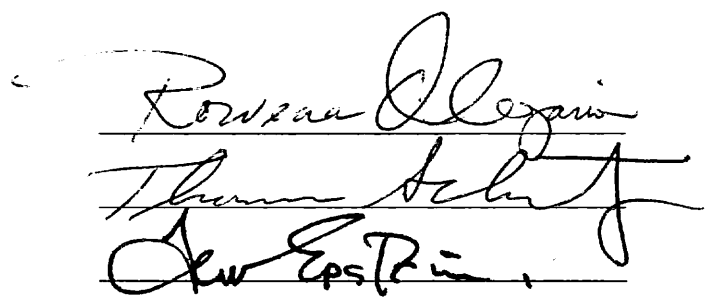
A WARM BUCKET OF SPIT: PERSONALITY AND THE VICE PRESIDENCY

By
Connor Alexander

Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of the
Department of History of Vanderbilt University
In partial fulfillment of the requirements
for Honors in History

April 2008

On the basis of this thesis defended by the candidate on 23 April 2008 we, the undersigned, recommend that the candidate be awarded High Honors in History:



Contents

INTRODUCTION

"I do not propose to be buried until I am dead"

Though they are the country's second-in-command, some vice presidents have been little more than second-rate. Aaron Burr was indicted and charged with murder while serving as vice president.[1] Abraham Lincoln's vice president, Hannibal Hamlin, found presiding over the Senate so tedious he spent the majority of his time outside of Washington, going so far as enlisting in the Coast Guard to provide an excuse for his absence.[2] Spiro Agnew pleaded no contest to tax evasion and money laundering before being bounced from office. Dan Quayle arguably did more for late-night comedians than for the country. While none of these figures were particularly confidence inspiring and some were downright laughable, most vice presidents do not deserve derision. Many are simply forgotten. Yet through a quirk of the Constitution any of these men might have been thrust into national leadership. How did an office that is literally a heartbeat away from the presidency become inhabited by such political backbenchers?

The answer is a complicated one. The ratification of the Twelfth Amendment, domestic political events, growth in American power abroad, media obsession with popular presidents, as well as many other factors, are each partly responsible for the evolution of the office. The focus of this paper will be on yet another: the behavior of its first occupant. With regard to the vice presidency the Constitution was vague, obscure, and evasive. Everything about the office was open to interpretation, and a unique opportunity existed for its first occupant to effect great

---

[1] Doug Lindner, "The Treason Trial of Aaron Burr," *Famous American Trials* <http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/burr/burraccount.html>.
[2] United States Senate, "Hannibal Hamlin, 15th Vice President (1861-1865)," *U.S. Senate: Art & History Home* <http://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/common/generic/VP_Hannibal_Hamlin.htm>.

change. While John Adams may not have written a script his predecessors would be doomed to recite, his actions demarcated the borders of the stage on which they would perform. Adams's actions provided the props future vice presidents would have at their disposal. What they did with the props was for them to decide.

To begin, one must understand how mismatched Adams was with the vice presidential job description. Adams wanted to lead debate, not preside over it. He wanted to shape the agenda, not watch as others did the shaping. The vice president needed to be a listener, but Adams wanted to be listened to. He was called on to be a spectator to events that were crucial to the future of the country, something that worked against his every natural instinct to inform and lead others. Adams ultimately lacked the self-restraint needed to effectively perform such a role, and the vice presidency became a kind of purgatory for him.

An understanding of Adams's personality – his behavior, temperament, disposition – is necessary to appreciate why he responded to events the way he did. Having read several lengthy biographies, pored over personal correspondence and analyzed dozens of accounts describing Adams in various secondary literature, I have been able to piece together some of his most important traits.[3] While it is impossible to know with any certainty the personality of a man who lived so long ago, the following picture is well informed and consistent with existing accounts. Adams was nothing if not patriotic, devoted to the betterment of America and to the protection of our fledgling democracy. He was kind and warm to those he loved, an understanding husband and father. Adams was a trustworthy and loyal friend and expected the same in return. He was straightforward and lacked political cunning. Perhaps most of all, Adams was brilliant and well

[3] See Ralph Brown, *The Presidency of John Adams* (Wichita: The University Press of Kansas, 1975).; James Grant, *John Adams: Party of One* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005).; David McCullough, *John Adams* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001).; Francis Russell, *Adams: An American Dynasty* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002).; Page Smith, *John Adams: Volume II 1784-1826* (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1962).

read, gifted rhetorically and always eager to argue. While these traits served him well in many ways, they were also his greatest failings. He was loyal to the point of blindness and continued to trust friends in the presence of obvious betrayal. His lack of guile hindered him from recognizing it in others. Adams assumed his patriotic motivations were shared by all and was easily outmaneuvered by those who were more politically self-interested. He detested faction and by trying to be evenhanded he succeeded only in alienating others.

Adams's brilliance did not include political prescience. He hammered away at issues long past the point where a more adept politician would have admitted defeat and moved on. He had no patience for grandstanders or demagogues and had little restraint in telling them so. While he was a powerful orator, his speeches were often so argumentative that he did himself more harm than good. Even those who agreed with him resented the implication they were incapable of advocating their position as effectively as he and grew to loathe his paternalistic lectures. He was superior and imperious, egotistical and fragile. He was petulant at times and self-pitying. In *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787* (1969) Gordon Wood writes regarding Adams: "Perhaps he read and remembered too much; perhaps he was too honest, too much the scientist and too little the politician." Wood continues, "But he paid a high price for his honesty." He paid in diminished success: "Adams steadily and perversely moved in a direction that eventually left him isolated from the main line of American intellectual development."[4] He also became isolated from the majority politically. Adams's personality and resulting behavior may have forever changed the way vice presidents interact with their peers in government. Had someone less inclined to alienate his contemporaries been the first VP the position may not have been quite so

[4] Gordon Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1969) 569.

relegated to the fringes of power in Washington. The significance of Adams's disposition is seen by examining several events that occurred during his tenure

To truly understand Adams's actions as vice president one must explore the formation of this constitutional quagmire. Chapter One shows that the framers of the Constitution treated the vice presidency as little more than an afterthought. The office was created not for its function, but for its electoral expediency, something Adams recognized. He wrote to tell a friend that once Congress invented a better way to manage elections, "they will cut off [my] head." He sarcastically continued, "and I myself should be ambitious of the honor of wielding the ax."[5] Adams's rumination only underlines the extent to which the office was poorly constructed and ill defined.

Chapter Two begins with a discussion of the election of 1788 and the behind-the-scenes politicking of Alexander Hamilton.[6] Hamilton concocted an elaborate system that, at least initially, was meant to ensure George Washington won the presidency unanimously and that Adams came in second place.[7] Hamilton, however, was overzealous in his effort to secure such an outcome and, after deciding Adams would be uncooperative with his plans for Federalist domination, set about whittling away his electoral votes.[8] He knew he could not defeat Adams and probably did not want to, but he did want to guarantee Adams would not be elected in a landslide. Hamilton wanted a weakened vice president, and that is exactly what he got. Votes were siphoned away to other candidates, and Adams was elected with less than half the electoral

---

[5] John Adams, July 16, 1789, "Letterbook," *Microfilms of The Adams Papers* (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1955): Reel 115.
[6] Page Smith, *John Adams: Volume II 1784-1826* (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1962), 732-742.
[7] Alexander Hamilton, January 25, 1789, "To James Wilson," *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton: Volume V*, ed. Harold C. Syrett, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1962), 247.
[8] Ibid., 249.

votes of Washington, a tremendous embarrassment. Adams was hurt and bitter but refused to believe Hamilton was behind the machinations, even as friends implored him to face facts.

The remainder of Chapter Two concerns the seemingly unimportant issue of titles. Adams had strong opinions on what constituted a proper title for important officers of government and, either because he was unconcerned or unaware of the damage it would cause, placed himself in the middle of the brewing dispute. Adams hoped the president would be referred to as "His highness, the President of the United States of America, and Protector of the Rights of the Same."[9] The suggestion enraged many, amused some, and was supported by few. He lost the fight over titles and made fast enemies with several of the senators he was constitutionally obligated to preside over.[10] Adams was savaged in the press, derided in the Senate and denounced by one of his oldest and closest friends.[11] Not simply an isolated incident of political tone-deafness, this event set the stage for the campaign against Adams as a monarchist and provided further proof of his being woefully out of touch.

These problems alone would have been enough to overwhelm Adams's vice presidency but, as Chapter Three will detail, they were compounded by the political battle lines being drawn around him. As he assumed office and set to the task of organizing the new nation, the country's first political factions were forming. Adams loathed political division and feared that dissension in so young a country would quickly bring about its destruction.[12] Adams's political inexperience was magnified by the acumen of the leaders of these factions, Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson. Hamilton was a strategic and inexhaustible organizer for the Federalists. Jefferson was

---

[9] William Maclay, *Sketches of Debate in the First Senate of the United States, in 1789-90-91*, ed. George W. Harris, (Harrisburg: Lane S. Hart, 1880), 40.
[10] Ibid., 42.
[11] John Adams to Benjamin Rush, July 5, 1789: Reel 115.
[12] Letter from John Adams to Abigail Adams, 17 March 1797 *Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive* <http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/aea/cfm/doc.cfm?id=L17970317ja>.

masterful at appearing disengaged while simultaneously bankrolling Democratic hatchet men across the country.[13] The two were brilliant politicians and well matched adversaries. Unfortunately, Adams was tasked to lead a body over which both men struggled for control. Jefferson had his Democrats, Hamilton his Federalists, Washington was unassailable, and Adams was everyone's whipping boy. The wagons were circled, and Adams was left alone.

While Adams's actions often got him into trouble, his inaction also hindered the development of his office. Chapter Four will discuss how his absence from some of the most important political debates of the age diminished his, and his office's, relevance. The debate over the permanent location of the capital and the assumption of state debts, the Nootka Sound episode and the suppression of the Whiskey Rebellion all provide examples, not of Adams's over-action, but of his inaction.

The implications of Adams's political isolation are essential to understanding the future direction the office would take. He was unable to shore up any power for the office outside of what little the Constitution mandated. Therefore, any power exerted by future VPs would have to be of their own making; little if any inherent power would be acquired by virtue of being vice president since Adams was too marginalized to capture any of his own. Adams's problems did not eliminate the possibility of influential vice presidents, but his own powerlessness gave his followers little room to work with. Future VPs would be on a short leash because of Adams's inability to break free from the start. If someone more politically inclined had been first, the horizons of the office might have been more expansive than those forged by Adams.

Interestingly, among historians the vice presidency has been under-explored and the origins of the office have been all but ignored. Of the four sources I have reviewed concerning

---

[13] Thomas Jefferson, April 26, 1798, "To James Madison," *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson Volume 30*, ed. Barbara B. Oberg, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 300.

the vice presidency, only 32 out of their combined 1,050 pages discuss either the Constitutional Convention or Adams's time as vice president.[14] Much of the secondary literature ignores the impact Adams had on the office and instead sees the effects of his behavior as limited to his own term, as if once he left the next vice president was given a blank slate. Investigations of the vice presidency that do not seriously consider the origins of the office are missing a crucial aspect of the story.

While biographies that deal exclusively with Adams discuss his vice presidency in more detail, a dearth of information still exists. David McCullough's 750-page Pulitzer Prize-winning biography contains only 50 pages dealing with Adams's vice presidential years. Much of these pages discuss the personal and family issues he faced during this time and not his political problems. Other biographies also offer little analysis; the important issues Adams faced throughout his eight years as VP are discussed, but none is placed into a larger historical or political context. None attempts to reveal the larger implications of Adams's actions or hint at the future changes the office would undergo.

One secondary source of information on the vice presidency that deals with Adams's contributions to the office – and contains most of the 32 pages mentioned above – is *Crapshoot: Rolling the Dice on the Vice Presidency* (1992) by Jules Witcover. Witcover characterizes Adams as serving Washington in political harmony and with full appreciation of the limitations of his office.[15] He justifies this reading of the situation with Adams's quote that "I am Vice President. In this I am nothing, but I may be everything."[16] Witcover further emphasizes

---

[14] See Jody Baumgartner, *The American Vice Presidency Reconsidered* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2006).; Paul Light, *Vice-Presidential Power: Advice and Influence in the White House* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984).; Relyea, Harold, and Charles Arja, *The Vice Presidency of the United States: Evolution of the Modern Office* (New York: Nova Science Publishers, 2002).; Jules Witcover, *Crapshoot: Rolling the Dice on the Vice President* (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1992).

[15] Jules Witcover, *Crapshoot: Rolling the Dice on the Vice President* (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1992), 17.

[16] Ibid., 18.

Adams's satisfaction with the job by stating that he served as a de facto majority leader and leader of debate in the Senate. Witcover, however, fails to mention that Adams was roundly criticized for this behavior.[17]

My own study takes issue with Witcover's conclusion. One quote in particular illustrates my view. After being denounced by enemies and allies alike in the Senate for continually overstepping his bounds, Adams sulks that "I have no desire ever to open my mouth again upon any question."[18] Far from Witcover's idea that Adams was comfortable with his role and his office's limitations, I believe Adams felt trapped, ineffective and underutilized and that he constantly strove to increase his power within Washington's administration. He felt stifled by the constitutional limitations imposed on him and ignored by men he considered inferior to himself. Adams lamented that "my country has in its wisdom contrived for me the most insignificant office that ever the invention of man contrived or his imagination conceived."[19] These are not the sentiments of a man at peace with his job.

In 1848, when Daniel Webster was offered the vice presidency on the Whig ticket, he declined, saying, "I do not propose to be buried until I am dead."[20] I imagine that, in retrospect, Adams would have wholeheartedly agreed. During his time in office he was called a British-loving monarchist and was referred to in a popular poem as "the first spawn of hell."[21] He was threatened with a duel by Pierce Butler, a senator from South Carolina and a member of the body over which Adams presided. He alienated many, was ignored by others, and ultimately did little to grow his office. While Adams did not preside over the destruction of the vice presidency, he was not the best person to see to its expansion. Considering the unhappiness he felt and the abuse

---

[17] Maclay, *Sketches of Debate*, 63.
[18] John Adams to John Trumbull, March 9, 1790: Reel 115.
[19] John Adams, December 6, 1787: Reel 112.
[20] Jody Baumgartner, *The American Vice Presidency Reconsidered* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2006), 3.
[21] Smith, 778.

he suffered, I believe Adams would have considered John Nance Garner's statement that the vice presidency was not worth "a warm bucket of spit" an understatement. To have a man who was so unhappy, so maligned, as the first vice president, who would serve as the example that others would follow – even if not consciously – affected the course the office would ultimately take. Adams's personality deserves a share of the credit for the evolution of the vice presidency.

CHAPTER ONE

The Founders' (blurry) vision

Reading through James Madison's notes on the Philadelphia Constitutional Convention, one is struck that the vice presidency is only discussed on three days, September 4, 6, and 7, out of a convention that stretched from May 14 to September 17, 1787.[1] Once discussion was underway it became clear that the vice president's constitutional mandate vested him with only two responsibilities: presiding over the deliberations of the Senate and standing by to succeed the President in the event of his death or disability. An official member of the executive branch with leadership over part of the legislative branch, this duality speaks to the fact that the functions of the office were secondary to the reason for its creation. The office originated as little more than a reluctant afterthought. The vice presidency was created to remedy the far more important problem plaguing the delegates: how to elect a president.

When the authors of the Constitution gathered in May of 1787 to forge a new government, the office of the vice presidency was far from the minds of all. In June, Alexander Hamilton initially floated the notion of such a position. He mentioned it casually, not in a formal proposal to the Convention but in a speech in which he outlined his plan for the new government.[2] The long speech covered many topics; he discussed the three branches of government, the duties that should be distributed among them, terms of office, and his belief in federalism. Out of this much larger speech, one proposal was made that hinted at the vice

---

[1] James Madison, "Notes of Debate," *The Federal Convention and the Formation of the Union of the American States*, ed. Winton U. Solberg, (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1958.)
[2] Relyea, Harold, and Charles Arja, *The Vice Presidency of the United States: Evolution of the Modern Office* (New York: Nova Science Publishers, 2002), 13.

presidency that was to come: "On the death, resignation or removal of the Governour [president] his authorities to be exercised by the President of the Senate till a Successor be appointed."[3] Hamilton believed that the person who ought to succeed the president was to be from the legislative branch. Hamilton felt that only in the event the president was unable to serve would the VP move into, and lead, the executive branch and then only until such time as the president could resume the office or be replaced by some unspecified procedure.[4]

Hamilton's proposal was quickly brushed aside. Many of his proposals regarding presidential power were seen as monarchist, and with good reason. Hamilton mused that concerning the executive branch, "The English model was the only good one on this subject." Moreover, Hamilton felt the delegates should "Let the Executive be for life."[5] Obviously, this did not go over well with most delegates. Having just fought a war to rid America of one monarch, the idea of creating another was a nonstarter. The plan was never seriously considered and Hamilton left the Convention soon after, only to return at the end to help craft the final document.

The vice presidency only emerged because it offered a solution to the question plaguing delegates at the time: how best to elect a president. Debate had gone on for weeks over the exact structure and powers that should be granted to the executive branch. Once it was decided that executive power be entrusted to a single officer, eventually called a "president," the debate moved to how he would be chosen.[6] Presidential selection became a major stumbling block in the final month of the Convention. Delegates needed to find a way to select the leader of the executive branch that would avoid undue influence on the part of the legislative branch, any one

---

[3] James Madison, June 18, 1797, "Notes of Debate," 148.
[4] Jules Witcover, *Crapshoot: Rolling the Dice on the Vice President* (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1992), 12.
[5] James Madison, June 18, 1797, "Notes of Debate," 146.
[6] Catherine Bowen, *Miracle at Philadelphia: The Story of the Constitutional Convention* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1966), 57.

state, or collusion among any group of states.[7] In these discussions, the notion of a vice president entered not at all, yet establishment of the position depended upon them.

One faction within the Convention, represented by Roger Sherman of Connecticut, argued that the president "ought to be appointed by and accountable to the legislature only."[8] Sherman felt that since the legislature was to be the embodiment of the people's will, what more fitting an institution to select a leader than this. Others, like Pennsylvania's Gouverneur Morris, argued such a decision "would give birth to intrigue and corruption between the executive and legislature previous to election and to partiality in the executive afterwards to the friends who promoted him."[9] Morris and others believed this mingling of the two branches would only cause harm to both. The fear was that a president elected either because of, or in spite of, congressional machinations would never be able to relate to the body on an equal footing.

Eventually the idea of allowing Congress to choose the president was discarded for several reasons. First, the person chosen would be beholden to his benefactors in the legislature. Second, smaller states feared that the larger states, due to their proportionally larger representation in Congress, would do the picking. Charles Pinckney of South Carolina warned: "The most populous states by combining in favor of the same individual will be able to carry their points."[10]

Third, disagreement existed among the delegates with regard to the power national political institutions should properly exert. There was a deep distrust on the part of many towards any federal, centralized institution. Morris worried about "the great evil of cabal"[11] that invariably occurs in small groups removed from the watchful eyes of their constituents. To

---

[7] Jody Baumgartner, *The American Vice Presidency Reconsidered* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2006), 8.
[8] Witcover, 13.
[9] Ibid., 13.
[10] Baumgartner, 10.
[11] James Madison, Sep. 4, 1797, "Notes of Debate," 307.

combat this suspicion the states must be made the place for any presidential election to occur, far away from the corrupting influence of Philadelphia.

Similar population-based fears ruled out the state-centric approach advocated by Madison, Morris, and James Wilson of Pennsylvania. Their plan called for the direct election of the president by the people, making a state's population important.[12] Smaller states again balked at any system that would make their states' voters inconsequential. The heated issue needed a compromise, and quickly.

The compromise that eventually developed not only settled the issue of presidential selection, but resulted in the creation of the vice presidency. This approach was first suggested by Wilson and consisted of special presidential electors in each state equal in number to the total congressional membership. The electors would be chosen by means devised by each state legislature. However, the Electoral College system, as it came to be called, had an obvious pitfall, the problem of the favorite son.[13] A majority vote would be required to elect a president and if each state voted for their favorite son, as many delegates feared they would, there would be no winner. Every election would have the potential for deadlock and would require the invention of yet another method to break this tie. Beyond simple irritation, an electoral system that resulted in stalemate would breed uncertainty, the last thing an emerging nation needed. The president of a new nation needed an irrefutable mandate to maintain the citizenry's faith in his leadership.

The way around this problem was soon suggested. Instead of casting one vote for president, each elector would get two, one of which would be required to go to an individual not

---

[12] Bowen, 85.
[13] Baumgartner, 8.

of the same state as the elector.[14] Article II, Section I of the Constitution states: "The Electors shall meet in their respective States, and vote by Ballot for two persons, of whom one at least shall not lie an Inhabitant of the same State with themselves." This would minimize the risk of deadlock and was sufficient to persuade most delegates to embrace the compromise.

By reading Madison's notes from September 4, 1787, it becomes apparent that only as an aside did the Convention then turn its attention towards the possibility of a vice president. Once the more important problem of presidential election had been solved, the question became what to do with all the other votes cast, the ones for the losers. It was decided that, "in every case after the choice of the President, the person having the greatest number of votes of the Electors shall be the vice-president."[15] It was from the consternation over the favorite son problem that the vice presidency owes its existence.

One important conclusion that should be made at this point concerns the Framers' feelings toward the man who would be second-in-command. The intention was for the person chosen second to be esteemed equally with the man chosen first. Each elector was required to cast two votes for president, not one for president and one for vice. The person who came in second was assumed to be capable, qualified, and respected second only to the president.[16]

James Madison, reporting on the deliberations at the time, gave only passing mention to the possibility that the vice presidency might be left to political caprice and chicanery. "The only objection which occurred was that each Citizen after having given his vote for his favorite fellow Citizen would throw away his second on some obscure Citizen of another state in order to ensure the object of his first choice." Madison did not believe such a thing was possible, "But it could hardly be supposed that the Citizens of many States would be so sanguine of having their

---

[14] Ibid., 12.
[15] James Madison, Sep. 6, 1797, "Notes of Debate," 310.
[16] Witcover, 18.

favorite elected, as not to give their second vote with sincerity."[17] As the election of 1796, and others, would later prove, the citizens were in fact all too willing to engage in such electoral maneuvers. [18]

Despite the esteem most delegates felt was owed to the man who would become vice president, most held the office of the vice presidency itself in very low regard. North Carolina's Hugh Williamson observed about the vice presidency: "It was introduced only for the sake of a valuable mode of election which required two be chosen at the same time." The office had not been created out of need for the position but as a solution to an electoral problem. The role of the vice president appeared to many as make-work. Madison's notes on September 7 succinctly convey Williamson's view of the office, he "observed that such an officer as vice-President was not wanted".[19] Others argued that if such an office was to be created then it should most surely not be a paid position. The First Congress debated whether or not the vice president should receive a salary, some advocating that he only receive a per diem for the days he presided over the Senate.[20] John Adams's salary, as the first vice president, was set at $5,000, one-fifth of the president's. One senator protested that even this amount was excessive. His argument was that nowhere was it written that the vice president actually had to come to work.[21]

Other objections to the office emerged: "Mr. Gorham disapproved of making the next highest after the President, the vice-President, without referring the decision to the Senate in case

---

[17] Ibid., 15.
[18] Under the system then in place, electors had two votes, but both were for president; the runner-up in the presidential race was elected vice president. In 1796, each party intended to manipulate the results by having some of their electors cast one vote for the intended presidential candidate and one vote for somebody besides the intended vice presidential candidate, leaving their vice presidential candidate a few votes shy of their presidential candidate. The result was that too many Adams electors failed to cast their second vote for his vice president, Pinckney, and so Adams was elected president while his opponent, Jefferson, was elected vice president. For information see Ralph Brown, *The Presidency of John Adams* (Wichita: The University Press of Kansas, 1975).
[19] James Madison, Sep. 7, 1797, "Notes of Debate," 312.
[20] Baumgartner, 9.
[21] James Grant, *John Adams: Party of One* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005), 350.

the next highest should have less than a majority of votes." The problem was that while the vice president would have the second highest amount of votes, that number could be very small and potentially place a person in office with only minimal popular support. Nathaniel Gorham was rightfully concerned that, "as the regulation stands a very obscure man with very few votes may arrive at that appointment."[22] A Maryland delegate, Luther Martin, echoed this concern, though with more disdain. Martin sarcastically referred to the vice president in his letters as, "that great officer of government." He warned that because no majority vote was required for his election, "it is very possible, and not improbable, that he may be appointed by the electors of a single large state..." Martin sought to wash his hands of the situation and wrote that, "Every part of the system which relates to the Vice President, as well as the present mode of electing the President, was introduced and agreed upon after I left Philadelphia."[23] Delegates desperately dodging culpability in its creation did little to encourage respect for the office.

Returning to Hamilton's original proposal, one issue that had not yet been remedied was who would become the presiding officer of the Senate. Hamilton hoped the President of the Senate would be made vice president and take over the presidency in a crisis. This sparked concern that the Senate would wield too much influence in presidential succession if a senator was to move into executive leadership following presidential disability. Having a member of the legislative branch second in the line of succession troubled many delegates. Other objections were raised about having an elected senator as presiding officer of the body.[24] This would mean depriving the state from whence he came a vote on all occasions other than a tie. No state was eager to forfeit half their senatorial delegation for the privilege of wielding a gavel.

---

[22] James Madison, Sep. 4, 1797, "Notes of Debate," 306.
[23] Ibid., 307.
[24] Baumgartner, 11.

An elected vice president provided a convenient remedy for both of these problems. The Convention seized upon the idea and decided the vice president would be made President of the Senate and given a vote only in the case of a tie. The problem of a member of the executive branch serving simultaneously in the legislative branch raised a basic question about separation of powers. Elbridge Gerry of Massachusetts protested the decision and warned: "We might as well put the President himself at the head of the legislature." Gerry continued, "The close intimacy that must subsist between the President and Vice President makes it absolutely improper." This was part of a much larger objection, however. As the Convention notes indicate, "Mr. Gerry was against having any vice President."[25] An interesting historical irony considering Elbridge Gerry went on to serve as James Madison's second vice president.

Another dissenter was Virginian George Mason. He agreed with the need for the vice presidency but envisioned the VP as leader of a "Council of State," something akin to the cabinet. The head of this Council would serve as "Vice President of the United States pro tempore" to take over "upon any vacancy or disability of the chief magistrate." Mason felt making the vice president an officer in the Senate would give too much power to the organization. He considered it "that unnecessary (and dangerous) officer, the Vice President, who for want of other employment is made President of the Senate." This was not a benign problem. Mason felt it resulted in "dangerously blending the executive and legislative power."[26] These objections, along with many others, would prove serious enough that both Mason and Gerry would ultimately refuse to sign the final draft of the Constitution.

---

[25] James Madison, Sep. 7, 1797, "Notes of Debate," 314.
[26] Witcover, 16.

Others rushed to the aid of the vice presidency and defended the placement of a member of the executive branch in the legislative branch as the only sensible solution to a complex problem. Hamilton, whose idea it was to begin with, observed in "The Federalist No. 68":

> The appointment of an extraordinary person, as Vice-President, has been objected to as superfluous, if not mischievous. It has been alleged, that it would have been preferable to have authorized the Senate to elect out of their own body an officer answering that description. But two considerations seem to justify the ideas of the convention in this respect. One is, that to secure at all times the possibility of a definite resolution of the body, it is necessary that the President should have only a casting vote. And to take the senator of any State from his seat as senator, to place him in that of President of the Senate, would be to exchange, in regard to the State from which he came, a constant for a contingent vote.[27]

Hamilton believed that such an appointment was necessary and appropriate.

Ultimately, objections were heard but quickly pushed aside. After all, the Convention was winding down, the delegates had been gathered for four months at this point and final language had to be worked out so that a constitution could be written. The objections were lost in the shuffle of creating a new government. Besides, as another delegate observed, "If the vice-President were not to be President of the Senate, he would be without employment."[28] This goes back to the central problem of a make-work vice presidency; they had to find something for him to do, even if that meant a little violation of the separation of powers.

When it became clear the vice presidency was there to stay, it seems logical that the Convention would then turn its full attention towards the issue of succession. Unfortunately, this

---

[27] Alexander Hamilton, "The Federalist No. 68," *The Federalist*, ed. Terence Ball. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 332.
[28] James Madison, Sep. 7, 1797, "Notes of Debate," 314.

did not occur. Delegates were more interested in fleshing out the vice president's role in the Senate than in the potentially more critical matter of replacing a fallen president. The issue was discussed, but only appears in the notes as one of several topics on only one day.

The Committee on Style was presented with two different proposals concerning the exact wording of the section on presidential succession. Told to combine them into one, the result was Article II, Section 1 of the Constitution:

> In case of the removal of the President from office, or of his death, resignation or inability to discharge the powers and duties of the said office, the same shall devolve upon the Vice President, and the Congress may by law provide for the Case of Removal, Death, Resignation, or Inability, both of the President and Vice President, declaring what Officer shall then act as President, and such officer shall act accordingly, until the Disability be removed, or a President shall be elected.

Two ambiguities arose from this carelessly drawn language. First, did the delegates intend for "the powers and duties" to devolve to the *person* of the vice president or the *office*? This distinction is critical to understanding the purpose of the passage. If the latter, the vice president would only be acting president. If the former, then he would be president. Second, did the phrase "until the Disability be removed, or a President shall be elected" imply a special election should be held or did it mean the vice president will serve the remainder of his elected term?[29]

According to Madison, the Framers initially proposed that in the event of the death of a president the vice president would serve only as "acting" president "until another President be chosen," suggesting that only the powers and duties of the office would devolve on him temporarily, not the office itself.[30] However, this language was dropped by the Committee on

---

[29] Baumgartner, 12.
[30] Witcover, 17.

Style. The matter remained unresolved until the first implementation of the clause fifty-four years later, when the decisiveness of the vice president, John Tyler, upon the sudden death of President William Henry Harrison, for practical reasons mooted any further discussion of the matter.

The vice presidency is something of a constitutional hybrid, an oddity in a system carefully crafted to separate the functions and powers of the various branches of government. The Founding Fathers created an office that many felt was electorally necessary but functionally irrelevant. The political no-man's-land created by the Framers, within which the vice presidency operates, has shaped the history of the office for better or worse ever since

CHAPTER TWO

Off to a bad start

Adams was an obvious choice for vice president and, after George Washington, he was one of the most visible, most renowned, most capable figures of the Revolution. Many assumed he would have his choice of offices in the newly formed government, all but the presidency, which was assured to Washington. Geographical balance was also on Adams's side. Virginia would contribute the president; the Middle States the capital, initially being in New York; and New England would need to be awarded a visible position within the new government.

There were potential rivals for the vice presidency: John Hancock, George Clinton and John Jay were three alternatives mentioned in the months preceding the 1788 election. Friends warned Adams that enthusiasm existed for fellow Massachusetts native Governor Hancock among Federalists in New England. Clinton was Governor of New York and the leader of the Anti-Federalists in that state and could count on receiving support from the Middle States.[1] In late summer, rumors swirled that Jay would either be awarded the vice presidency or placed on the Supreme Court.[2] Adams was clearly the frontrunner but the election would be no landslide.

In the months prior to the election letters from friends arrived en masse, each with different and sometimes conflicting advice on how he ought to secure his vice presidential bid. He was told to accept a position in the Massachusetts state government or quietly put his name forward as a contender for a Senate seat, all with the goal of raising his profile. Adams had been out of the country for nearly ten years, first as part of the envoy to France and later as America's

---

[1] Page Smith, *John Adams: Volume II 1784-1826* (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1962), 735.
[2] John Adams, November 26, 1788: Reel 112.

first ambassador to Great Britain. Keeping with the custom of the time, Adams refused to actively campaign for office; to do so would have been wildly inappropriate. Adams instead settled into a relatively peaceful routine at home in Braintree, for once working as the farmer he always imagined himself to be.[3]

While he certainly enjoyed his sojourn on the farm, Adams grew increasingly restless as the election approached. He was no doubt conflicted. On the one hand, he felt he deserved the honor of being offered the vice presidency, but he realized that to accept the office would be to become a martyr to it. While he swore to friends he was oblivious to the politicking around him, he eagerly devoured news of change in his political fortunes. He admitted the results of the election would affect either his comfort or his vanity: "If they mortify my vanity, they give me comfort. They cannot deprive me of comfort without gratifying my vanity."[4]

In July, when gossip reached Adams that Jay had become the favored VP candidate, his mood darkened. He was hurt by the news and felt he must not "stand very high in the esteem, admiration or respect of his country." Adams continued plaintively, "The public judgment, the public heart and the public voice, seem to have decreed to others every public office," and nothing was left for him.[5] For someone so immensely confident in his abilities he was frequently gripped by fears that his contributions to the country would be diminished in comparison to other, more charismatic founders. "The history of our Revolution will be one continued lie from one end to the other," Adams grumbled. "The essence of the whole," he feared, "will be that Dr. Franklin's electric rod smote the earth and out sprung General Washington. That Franklin electrised him with his rod, and thenceforward these two conducted all the policy negotiations,

---

[3] John Adams, March 2, 1789, "Letterbook," *Microfilms of The Adams Papers* (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1955): Reel 115.
[4] John Adams, December 2, 1788: Reel 112.
[5] John Adams to Abigail Amelia Adams, July 16, 1788, "Correspondence," *Correspondence of Miss Adams: Volume II,* ed. Caroline Abigail Smith De Windt, (New York: Wiley and Putnam, 1842), 89.

legislation, and war."[6] These fears of being overshadowed were magnified as the election approached and, while Adams feigned disinterest, inside he was a nervous wreck.

Alexander Hamilton's role in the election is first seen with the visit Henry Knox paid to Adams in the fall of 1788. While the two had been friends for many years the visit was more than a simple social call. Knox had come as an emissary of Hamilton with the goal of persuading Adams not to accept the vice presidency if it were offered to him. Knox appealed to Adams's ego, saying that he was too big a man in his own right to ever hold a position subordinate to Washington. Adams did not take the bait and was clear that while he would not actively seek the vice presidency he would do nothing to discourage others from foisting it upon him. Knox relayed the news of Adams's intransigence to the unhappy Hamilton.[7]

By this time, Hamilton had established himself as the leader of the Federalist faction, a group that sought a more powerful federal government; specifically, a more potent executive branch. Hamilton was a natural politician, and political intrigue came naturally to him. He wanted someone as VP who would be more pliant than Adams but was not willing to publicly say so for fear of alienating Federalists in New England.[8] Hamilton eventually concluded a scheme to oust Adams would be too risky and reluctantly gave way, writing to Madison that he would back Adams, though "not without apprehensions on the score we talked about."[9] To one Massachusetts Federalist he wrote, "On the question between Mr. H[ancock] and Mr. A[dams]... I have upon the whole concluded that the latter ought to be supported." Hamilton explained that he had had several concerns but that upon mature reflection his worries had been relieved. Ever the calculating politician, Hamilton ended his letter with a friendly reminder: "I trust nothing of

---

[6] John Adams, April 4, 1790: Reel 115.
[7] Smith, 740.
[8] Ibid., 739.
[9] Alexander Hamilton, November 23, 1788, *The Works of Alexander Hamilton: Volume VIII,* ed. Henry Cabot Lodge, (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1904), 203.

the kind suggested in my former letter will disturb the harmony of [Washington's] administration."[10] He wanted to ensure his machinations remained secret.

With Hamilton's acquiescence, Adams's election as vice president was assured. Most likely it would have been assured even without it. Despite the problems he would soon face, Adams still possessed tremendous influence and commanded great respect. Hamilton's approval simply sealed the deal. However, if Hamilton had to accept Adams as VP he was determined to diminish his power. Hamilton feared an electoral landslide would give Adams the power to compete for leadership of the Federalists, and this he would not allow.

Following the deal struck at the Constitutional Convention, the method for selecting a president stipulated that once electors were chosen they would each cast two votes, both for president. The person to receive the most votes would be named president and the person with the second most electoral votes would be made VP. If there was a tie or if no one succeeded in capturing a majority of the votes, then the election would be left for the House of Representatives to decide. Under the system in place at the time, a tie between the intended presidential and vice presidential candidates was a legitimate possibility. To prevent such an outcome, at least one electoral vote would have to be thrown from Adams to some other candidate. Solving this potential problem allowed Hamilton to kill two birds with one stone: prevent a tie for the presidency and weaken Adams.

As soon as the popular election returns were announced and the electors in the various states were selected, Hamilton launched his campaign to protect Washington and stifle Adams. Hamilton urged Washington-friendly electors in various states to "throw away a few votes, say 7 or 8: giving these to persons not otherwise thought of."[11] He wrote to others and asked that they

---

[10] Alexander Hamilton, *Works: Volume VIII*, 211.
[11] Alexander Hamilton, *Works: Volume VIII*, 203.

divert several votes from Adams, all in the name of assuring that first place should go to Washington. He proposed that three should be thrown from Adams in New Jersey and two in Connecticut. He wrote an elector in Pennsylvania and suggested that the state drop three or four Adams votes, adding, "For God's sake let not our zeal for a secondary object [Adams] defeat or endanger the first [Washington]."[12] Hamilton was able to use the ruse of securing Washington's election as president to disguise his true goal of undermining Adams. Hamilton asked for a few votes here and a few votes there. His requests aroused little suspicion; as far as each knew it was only two or three votes. Hamilton, however, knew that these few votes from many states would add up to a powerful rebuke.

By early March 1789, the unofficial returns were in. Washington was elected unanimously, receiving one vote from each elector, for a grand total of sixty-nine. Adams drew only thirty-four, one short of a majority. Hamilton's plan had resulted in some thirty-five votes being thrown away "to persons not otherwise thought of."[13] When the results of the election finally reached Adams, who had no idea of Hamilton's intrigues, he was stunned and saddened and for days considered resigning. "Is not my election to this office, in the scurvy manner in which it was done, a curse rather than a blessing?" he wrote to his good friend Benjamin Rush. "Is this justice? Is there common sense or decency in this business? Is it not an indelible stain on our country, countrymen, and constitution? I assure you I think so." Nothing but his "apprehension of the great mischief and the final failure of the government from my refusal and assigning my reasons for it prevented me from spurning it."[14] It pained him that he should have run so badly, yet the outcome owed less to the merits of Adams's candidacy than to the strategy

---

[12] Alexander Hamilton, *Works: Volume VIII,* 212.
[13] Alexander Hamilton, January 25, 1789, "To James Wilson," *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton: Volume V,* ed. Harold C. Syrett, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1962), 249.
[14] John Adams, May 17, 1789: Reel 115.

of Hamilton. Hamilton had achieved what he desired, a weakened vice president. Adams would be starting from a disadvantage and, rather than work to remedy the situation, he would only exacerbate it.

***

From the very beginning of the first Congress of the United States, on April 23, 1789, the Senate was consumed by an issue that would do immense and lasting political harm to Adams. The fight was over titles; specifically, which, if any, should be given to the first and second officers of government. The Constitution simply referred to the offices as "president" and "vice president" but this was unacceptable to some, principally Adams. He felt the constitutionally given monikers lacked the dignity and respect that should be shown to the men ultimately selected to fill the positions. Such insignificant titles would breed familiarity and contempt among not only the citizens of America but foreign leaders as well. While this may appear to be a simple disagreement over a relatively insignificant issue, Adams's handling of the dispute magnified its importance. It was not his place to engage in such a disagreement in the first place; he was supposed to preside over debate, not lead it. The zeal and lack of aplomb with which he overstepped his bounds alienated all but his closest allies in the Senate. By refusing to let the issue lie, he solidified the contempt many felt towards him and won the scorn of one of his closest friends.

Adams felt strongly about the issue of titles. In order to have a stable and orderly government he believed it was necessary to show proper respect for its officers. Citizens needed forms and symbols to signify status and to facilitate a proper deference to authority. He believed that a country must give its leaders titles that reflect the import of their station. Titles were simply proper etiquette, something which Adams adamantly believed a country could not

continue to function without. "Can insubordination be prevented in the smallest society without distinction?"[15] He certainly did not think so.

Adams even constructed an amusing, if pointed, story justifying his beliefs. "Had I leisure to write plays… I would undertake a comedy under the title 'Government without Titles.'" The cast would be composed of a Quaker and his wife, their children and several servants. "They should live in the same room, dine, breakfast and sleep at the same table – they should promiscuously call each other by their names, without titles and live without form." Adams was convinced of the chaos that would invariably ensue. "The sons would soon be married to the female servants and the daughters to the male."[16] Even worse, the children and their servant spouses would soon curse and abuse the old man and woman. While Adams referred to this as a comedy, it was clearly no laughing matter. "Family titles are necessary to family government, Colonial titles are indispensable in Colonial government; and we shall find national titles essential to national government."[17] Adams considered those who did not see that a government without titles would never thrive, nor long survive, fools. "Let us not betray such gross ignorance of the world."[18]

Adams also worried about the stability and longevity of the emerging United States and felt that the dispensing of titles would go a long way to solidifying its foundation. He felt that a national government so weak in comparison to the states would have trouble attracting and keeping talented men. His solution: titles. "The Title of Right Honourable would raise the Senate and make it an object of ambition." If only such a title could be added to senators then able men "would be willing to leave their places at home to obtain it." Adams feared that if no such title

---

[15] John Adams to Benjamin Rush, July 5, 1789: Reel 115.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Ibid.
[18] John Adams to William Tudor, June 14, 1789, Reel 115.

were given to senators, "one half will resign before two years."[19] He earnestly believed titles would act as a magnet, drawing the rich and powerful from all corners of the country to the seat of the federal government. Titles, Adams believed, "would cost much less & would be less dangerous to Liberty" than almost any other scheme for strengthening the federal government.[20]

As for what specifically the chief executive should be called, Adams had a few thoughts. One he clearly did not like was "President," and he wondered, "What will the common people of foreign countries – what will the sailors and soldiers say, 'George Washington, President of the United States'?" His answer, "They will despise him."[21] There were presidents of fire companies and cricket clubs, and therefore such a simple title would not suffice for so important a figure as the leader of a country. Adams felt the title given to this man "must be something that includes all the dignities of the diplomatic corps, and something greater still."[22]

"Most Illustrious and Most Excellent [would] not suffice for the head of a great and independent nation," and thus it, too, was excluded as an acceptable alternative. Instead, Adams felt "His Highness" or "if you will, His Most Benign Highness is the correct title that will comport with his constitutional prerogatives and support his state in the minds of our own people or foreigners."[23] This suggestion did not last long and upon further reflection he concluded that "Highness was not high enough."[24] He now believed "representatives in the executive authority," and by this he meant Washington and himself, should be given "the title of Majesty."[25] Had he had his way, then, His Majesty George would have been the country's first President and His Majesty John its first VP.

---

[19] John Adams to William Tudor, June 14, 1789, Reel 115.
[20] Ibid.
[21] William Maclay, *Sketches of Debate in the First Senate of the United States, in 1789-90-91,* ed. George W. Harris, (Harrisburg: Lane S. Hart, 1880), 40.
[22] Maclay, *Sketches of Debate*, 41.
[23] John Adams, May 3, 1789, Reel 115.
[24] John Adams, June 26, 1789, Reel 115.
[25] John Adams to Cotton Tufts, June 28, 1789, Reel 115.

While many of Adams's justifications for the use of titles were compelling, there was something bizarre about the whole affair. The zeal with which he pursued the subject, at a time when aristocracy and the trappings of nobility were so obviously out of fashion, made him seem absurd and out of touch. It was bad politics from the beginning made worse by his tireless pursuit of the issue. Ultimately, however correct Adams may have been, the argument was not his to have. Had he been the senator from Massachusetts his actions would have been appropriate. Instead, he was the Vice President and was supposed to sit and listen, to patiently preside over the Senate and not engage in arm-twisting.

***

One of the most striking aspects of the issue of titles is the speed and intensity with which Adams leapt into the fray. He arrived in New York on April 20, 1789, was sworn in on the 21st, and on the 23rd, with barely enough time to have unpacked, Adams launched his campaign over titles.[26] He began with a lengthy speech trumpeting the merits of titles and providing historical support for his position reaching back to the ancient Romans.[27] The debate was begun by Adams on the very first day of the very first session of the First United States Congress. While his enthusiasm for the subject may have been off-putting, his reception was, at least initially, cordial.

The next day Adams again was the first to bring up titles and now faced the resistance of other senators. Several unhappy senators objected, and a vote was called to decide whether all discussion of titles should be ended permanently. Adams prevailed. Satisfied that he had the support of the Senate, he then moved on to the question of how he ought to address the Speaker of the House, Frederick Muhlenberg, a man he would deal with often. From the notes of debate it appears many assumed the question was a simple formality and did not require a response.

---

[26] John Adams, April 20, 1789, Reel 372.
[27] Maclay, *Sketches of Debate,* 22.

Adams was perfectly serious and only after again insisting on their advice did they suggest the Speaker be referred to as "honorable." This exchange was all it took for William Maclay, a senator from Pennsylvania, to form an unfavorable opinion of the vice president. Maclay wrote, "from this Omen, I think [Adams] may go and dream about Titles for none will he get."[28]

The following day, April 25th, Adams once again turned to the Senate for advice, this time on how he should conduct himself when Washington came to address the body for his swearing in. While many considered such problems of pretense superfluous, Adams most certainly did not. He felt matters of protocol deserved intense reflection and worried endlessly over such details. "I am Vice President, in this I am nothing, but I may be everything, but I am President also of the Senate. When the President comes into the Senate, what shall I be?" When Washington entered the Senate there could not be two presidents, and Adams pleaded for help, "I cannot be then, no Gentlemen I cannot, I cannot – I wish Gentlemen to think what I shall be." [29] Apparently overcome with worry Adams threw himself back in his chair. A long silence followed Adams's outburst, and Maclay writes that he was only barely able to keep his composure "God forgive me, for it was involuntary, but the profane Muscles of my face, were in Tune for laughter, in spite of my indisposition."[30] Adams's theatricality was inappropriate and ill-advised. He was off to a poor start and this was only the third day of the session.

On the day of Washington's swearing in, April 30th, Adams's nerves grew more jangled. He waited impatiently for his chance to address the Senate, once again seeking advice and reassurance. When others finished recounting the agenda for the day Adams seized the opportunity to speak and pleaded for help. "Gentlemen I wish for the direction of the Senate, the

---

[28] William Maclay, *The Diary of William Maclay and Other Notes on Senate Debates* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988) 5.
[29] Maclay, *Diary,* 6.
[30] Ibid.

President will I suppose address the Congress and how shall I behave, how shall I receive him, shall I be standing or sitting."[31] Notes show several senators spoke up only to say how insignificant they considered the question; others felt he should follow the example set by the leader of the House of Commons when the king spoke; still others felt no special ceremony was deserved. The remainder of the day up until Washington's inauguration was spent on this issue. Adams had hijacked the agenda to assuage his own neuroses.

The next day Adams saw an opening to not-so-subtly bring up the question of titles, and he acted fast. That day's session was to begin with a reading by the Secretary of the Senate of Washington's inaugural address. No sooner had the reading begun when objections arose in a chorus from the Senate floor. The Secretary had referred to Washington's address as "His Most gracious Speech."[32] To Adams, such a superlative would have been perfectly benign, an empty but required platitude. Many others disagreed. The words prefixed to the speech were objected to on the grounds that they too closely resembled the customs of the English government following a speech by the king. Having just fought a war to rid the continent of that same king, the idea of instituting a procedure mimicking Britain's was less than popular.

Adams was thunderstruck by the objection and rose to express his dismay that such a simple gesture could elicit even the slightest objection. He wondered how a practice could be despised only because of the country from which it originated. Already in a hole, what Adams said next amounted to continued digging. He was perplexed that the Senate would object to a practice that originated in "that Government under which we had lived so long and so happily formerly."[33] The reaction was swift and venomous, and Adams was forced to silence the objections by declaring the objectors out of order. He demanded silence and went on to finish his

---

[31] Maclay, *Diary,* 11.
[32] Maclay, *Diary,* 16-17.
[33] Maclay, *Diary,* 17.

defense of the prefixed words but to no avail. One by one the objectors rose to say that the people of the United States, having fought a war against that same government, now abhor the practices of the English monarchy. They believed the Senate should work to ensure no such monarchical practices should ever be allowed to infiltrate their emerging democracy. The objectors then set to determining whose suggestion the aggrandizement was. Adams leapt to his own defense and admitted full responsibility for the words' inclusion in the reading. He had indeed suggested their attachment but only because he could not have believed anyone would find offense. The objections continued and the matter of erasing the words was put to a vote. Adams lost decisively.[34]

Adams, oblivious to the growing hostility towards the subject of titles, urged the creation of a committee to study the issue and to recommend appropriate titles. A similar committee had already been created in the House and on May 5th both committees decided president and vice president would suffice. Adams persisted and a second Senate committee was convened, this time to invent a title for the president to be used by the Senate alone. The first rumblings of what potential titles for the president might be began to circulate. One option, taken from Poland, was "His Elective Majesty."[35] It was seen as ridiculous by many, but this was merely the opening act. On May 9th, the committee brought forth its recommendation: "His Highness the President of the United States of America and Protector of the rights of the same."[36] While Adams himself did not propose the title – it was the committee's recommendation – the members had been handpicked by Adams and were among his closest allies. While he did not propose it, there was no doubt whose recommendation the title truly was.

---

[34] Ibid.
[35] Maclay, *Diary*, 23.
[36] Maclay, *Diary*, 29.

"The most superlatively ridiculous thing I ever heard of," wrote Thomas Jefferson after hearing the proposed title.[37] Jefferson went beyond calling the label preposterous; he felt the proposal spoke to the mental health of Adams and concurred with the diagnosis given by Benjamin Franklin years earlier. Jefferson wrote about Adams, "Always an honest man, often a great one, but sometimes absolutely mad."[38]

Maclay and several other senators tried to kill the issue entirely and indefinitely postpone discussion of titles. Adams was not to be swayed, and he stood and interrupted South Carolina's Ralph Izard who was in the midst of explaining his own reasons for supporting postponement. "Up now got [Adams] and for 40 minutes did he harangue us."[39] He began by lambasting Izard for an imagined out-of-order remark and then moved on to his favorite topic, titles. Izard was incensed and took to the floor to argue with Adams. He claimed the Constitution already provided a perfectly suitable title for the president and, moreover, the Constitution specifically stated that no title of nobility shall be granted by the United States. He declared all such talk of titles supremely ridiculous and clearly unconstitutional. Responding to Adams's claim that foreign leaders would look down on such a simply titled president, Izard retorted, "I do not think it imports Us Much – perhaps the less they think or have occasion to think of Us the better."[40] In addition, the unilateral application of a title for the president would clearly offend the House. Adams acknowledged the likelihood that the Senate committee's recommendation would provoke a dispute with the House and suggested that establishing a conference committee to iron

---

[37] Thomas Jefferson, *Papers: Volume 30,* 315.
[38] Ibid., 316.
[39] Maclay, *Diary,* 31.
[40] Ibid.

out the differences between the two bodies might be the best solution. The compromise was put to a vote and succeeded.[41]

Several days later the issue reemerged, and discussion was postponed until the second committee was prepared to give its report. Maclay noted that Izard and several other senators voiced complaints about Adams, specifically his tendency to "school the Members from the Chair."[42] It was on this day that Izard coined the name Adams would long be referred to by his opponents: "His Rotundity." Another senator, Robert Morris, said they had only made "Mr. Adams Vice President to keep him quiet." Morris now regretted the decision. Maclay agreed and colorfully described to those gathered around him how ridiculous Adams appeared presiding over the Senate. "He will look on one side then on the other then down the Knees of his Breeches, then dimple his visage with the most silly kind of half smile." He continued, "God forgive me for the Vile thought, but I cannot help thinking of a Monkey just put into Breeches when I see him betray such evident marks of Self conceit."[43]

Adams began to tire of the strain of Senate business and turned to the person he always turned to when things were bad, his wife Abigail. Being alone in New York and under attack was more than Adams could bear, and he begged Abigail to leave home at once. He told her that she ought not wait for money to arrive to begin her travels; she must sell "any Thing at any Rate rather than not come on. If, no one will take the Place leave it to the Birds of the Air and Beasts of the field."[44] Adams was weary of fights with his colleagues and needed his wife to continue to endure. This was especially troubling since his plea for help was written not even a month after he first arrived in New York.

---

[41] Maclay, *Diary,* 32.
[42] Maclay, *Diary,* 33.
[43] Ibid.
[44] Letter from John Adams to Abigail Adams, 14 May 1789 [electronic edition]. *Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive.* Massachusetts Historical Society. http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/

Finally, on May 14th, the conference committee was prepared to report their findings and the results were read aloud to the Senate. They agreed that proper respect must be shown to the president but, in the interest of simplicity and so as not to further offend the House, there should be no special title given to the president. Several senators stood to offer their total agreement. They argued that the application of such lofty titles would smack of European aristocracy and must therefore be avoided at all costs. Haggling began over the exact wording for a resolution in support of the joint committee's report, and some pressed for an immediate vote on the issue to conclude it once and for all. The Senate resolved to postpone indefinitely the consideration of the report and then voted to put a curious resolution on its files.[45] The resolution asserted that its members would have liked to give the president some sort of title, but had not done so in deference to the wishes of the House of Representatives.[46]

The issue that had occupied the Senate for nearly the entire first month of its existence had finally been put to rest. What could have been dealt with in a matter a days was continued thanks to Adams's insistence. Maclay strongly believed that had it not been for Adams, "I am convinced the Senate would have been as averse to titles as the House of Representatives." He was optimistic that the issue had finally been resolved and Adams defeated. Concerning the subject of titles Maclay wrote, "farewell, may I never hear Motion or debate on thee More."[47]

Unfortunately, more motion and debate was exactly what Adams had in mind, and on May 15th Adams opened the day's session by informing the Senate that a letter had arrived which, he supposed, was intended for him. The letter, he said, had been improperly addressed to

---

[45] Maclay, *Sketches of Debate,* 31-32.
[46] *Annals of Congress: The Debates and Proceedings in the Congress of the United States: Volume I,* ed. Joseph Gales. (Washington: Gales and Seaton, 1834), 35-36.
[47] Maclay, *Diary,* 39.

"His Excellency, the Vice President."[48] Adams asked the opinion of his fellow senators on what to do with the unfortunately titled letter. Many laughed and assumed he was making fun of the recent debacle. Sadly, he was not joking. Adams repeated his plea for advice and asked whether the letter should be read or discarded immediately, unopened. He insisted the matter be put to a vote and vowed to only read the letter with majority approval. The letter was simply an offer by a local printer for the free use of his services, utterly inconsequential. Adams's handling of the letter, however, was not without consequence. Rather than use the letter self-deprecatingly, to relieve some of the hostility that he had engendered, Adams responded with petulance and rigidity. He was bitter and succeeded in exacerbating the damage he already had done to himself.

After this debacle Adams's mood took another plunge. Just days before he had begged Abigail to come to New York immediately, sparing the expense. Now he wrote to tell her things had become even more difficult for him and that he would rather resign his office than bring her to New York to suffer the difficulties he was forced to endure. Adams said he refused to make her as miserable as he was.[49]

***

Adams's handling of the titles debate alienated not only those who had little previous relationship with the man but one good friend as well. His active defense of titles led Benjamin Rush, one of his oldest friends, to accuse the VP of an inclination toward monarchy and of abandoning the principles he espoused at the beginning of the Revolution. "I am as much a republican as I was in 1775" was Adams's reply. Rush accused him of harboring monarchist feelings and said that no true patriot would ever support the dispensing of such grotesque titles. Adams launched into a lengthy and complicated explanation of his true feelings on government,

---

[48] Maclay, *Diary*, 40.

[49] Letter from John Adams to Abigail Adams, 18 May 1789 [electronic edition]. *Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive.* Massachusetts Historical Society. http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/

and it was his refusal to totally disavow the notion of a hereditary monarchy that convinced Rush his worst fears had been correct. Adams denied that "there is or ever was in Europe a more free republic than England." He further believed that no "liberty on earth ever equaled English liberty." This statement both enraged and hurt Rush, who felt his trust in Adams as a patriot had been betrayed. Adams's next sentence must have been ignored, which stated his feeling that "admitting absolute monarchy into this country, either in this or the next century, strikes me with horror." Adams had just the plan to prevent such an occurrence. "A little wisdom at present may preserve a free government in America, I hope forever – certainly for many centuries."[50] The little wisdom he was referring to was the use of titles, an argument Rush was not inclined to buy.

He firmly believed the government would endure, hopefully for centuries, free and democratic but would not be able to if matters of respect for authority and proper titles were not settled. "I affirm that they are indispensably necessary to give dignity and energy to government – and on this ground alone I am an advocate for them." He wanted to make clear that he was not doing this for self-aggrandizement "In my private character, I despise them as much at least as any… on earth." He firmly believed such titles ought to be applied to the president and would not back down, even in the face of condemnation from a close friend. "This is my opinion, and I scorn to be hypocrite enough to disguise it."[51]

Rush responded with yet another indictment on Adams's changed character. He wrote that he was hurt but mostly disappointed by Adams's newfound monarchist tendencies which were the obvious result of support for titles. Adams took exception and shot back, asking, "What would you say or think or feel if your own children, instead of calling you Sir, Father or Pappa, should accost you with the title of 'Ben?'" Rush had declared support of titles not only

---

[50] John Adams to Benjamin Rush, July 5 and 24, 1789, Reel 115.
[51] John Adams to Benjamin Rush, July 5, 1789, Reel 115.

monarchical and European but bizarre and of little consequence. Adams recognized that "Titles and honors it is true determine nothing, they are vain names and vain ceremony when they are ill placed." However, he continued, "Who does not know the influence they have on the thoughts of men. This is then a more serious affair than it appears at the first glance."[52]

The fight over titles caused a rift in the friendship of the two men. Rush did not keep his concerns over Adams to himself and instead spread his worries to many of Adams's friends and foes in New York. It was not until after Adams's presidency ended, in 1800, that the two attempted to renew their former friendship, more than 10 years after the fight over titles took place.[53] This sad estrangement highlights that Adams's behavior did not only mystify and irritate those who were already inclined to dislike him. Even a friend who knew the sacrifices Adams had made for his country was offended by his actions. If a friend reacted so negatively to Adams's behavior it becomes more understandable why many senators, who had little or no previous relationship with the vice president, were quick to anger.

***

That Adams badly misjudged public opinion is an important commentary on the man, but so is the real concern for the public welfare which motivated the titles campaign in the first place. He fought for the inclusion of titles into the newly forming government to the constant irritation of his opponents and the chagrin of his friends. He was unable to end the fight until he had been absolutely defeated, and even then he continued the argument in letters to friends for years to come. He overstepped the bounds of his office in all the wrong ways. He engaged his opponents from his seat presiding over the Senate. He gaveled his opponents to silence and declared them out of order when he wanted a chance to speak. He helped those he agreed with

---

[52] John Adams to Benjamin Rush, July 24, 1789, Reel 115.
[53] James Grant, *John Adams: Party of One* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005), 356.

and refused to act as the impartial judge he needed to be.[54] He did this, though, out of an absolute conviction that he was right and that titles were necessary for a stable and strong America. He was determined to do what he felt was right regardless of the cost to his popularity. The fight was not begun for selfish or vain reasons, but the ultimate ugliness of the battle overshadowed his altruistic intentions.

Adams's patronizing lectures to his Senate brethren showed his political insensitivity and fundamental misreading of his role as presiding officer. His friends and foes alike resented the behavior. Adams felt many in the Senate were of lesser importance than himself, and he did little to stifle his condescension. He wrote to tell friends that the Senate was languishing in the grips of ignorance and political cowardice. He said he heard thoughts "upon the subject of government [that] appear to me as extravagant as the drivelings of idiotism or the ravings of delirium."[55] These feelings of contempt that he expressed privately to friends were no doubt written on his face as Adams possessed no ability or desire to disguise them.

The battle over titles made the venerable Adams appear ridiculous. Caustically dismissed as "His Rotundity," Adams was made a mockery of. Congressmen, including the Speaker of the House, openly referred to one another as "Highness of the Senate" or "Highness of the Lower House" to highlight the absurdity of the labels.[56] Adams appeared out of touch and, worst of all, sympathetic to monarchy. His statements required little twisting to be seen as pro-British. While he was most certainly no Anglophile, he also was no Anglophobe. There were many traditions that Adams admired about the English system of government and could not understand why, simply by virtue of being English, they should be discarded.

---

[54] Maclay, *Diary*, 28.
[55] John Adams. May 8, 1789, Reel 115.
[56] Maclay, *Diary*, 37.

Adams's political views were manipulated by his enemies, often with his assistance, to mirror those of a blue-blooded British aristocrat. In reality Adams was the son of a farmer, a mildly successful lawyer whose little wealth existed only in his land. Adams was a self-made, hardworking New Englander, not the stuffy noble he was portrayed as. Adams himself thought "a descent from a line of virtuous, independent New England farmers for a hundred and sixty years, was a better foundation than a descent through royal or noble scoundrels."[57] Had he been a more capable politician, he might have prevented such accusations from spreading. Unfortunately, he was not, and the picture painted of Adams bore little resemblance to the man he actually was.

His involvement in the fight and the ultimate failure in adopting titles was a body blow to his popularity. The issue was not differentiated from Adams; he had already inextricably linked himself with the issue. To defeat titles was to defeat Adams. He had tied himself to a sinking ship and, by the end of his first month in office, had sustained a devastating defeat. At times, Adams realized the damage he had done to himself. A moment of reflection prompted his statement that, "A man must take so much pains to carry little points that seem of no importance." Doing so allowed for the possibility that he would be "despised for a fool by many and not thought very wise by any."[58] Adams understood the mistake he had made in this instance but when the next issue arose that he cared deeply about he would again throw himself back into the fray.

Adams continued writing to friends years after the debate over titles ended. One exchange in March 1790, nearly a year after the final postponement, is particularly illuminating. A friend, William Tudor, wrote to warn Adams of the long-term harm his intransigence and

---

[57] John Adams to Hannah Adams, March 10, 1791, "Correspondence," *The Works of John Adams Volume IX*, ed. Charles Adams, (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1854), 574.
[58] John Adams to William Tudor, May 9, 1789, Reel 115.

tendency to involve himself in Senate debate would cause. Adams was shocked by the advice: "You talk of my enemies but I assure you I have none. I am the enemy of no man living." He obliviously claimed not to have "intentionally offended any man, and I know not that I have actually offended any." He believed he had "never given my sentiments at large upon any question but once." This one occasion was the dispute over titles and even then, "I asked leave, and it was granted seemingly with pleasure." Adams's propensity for delusion appears in his next statement: "At other times I have only occasionally asked a question or made a single observation and that but seldom." Sulking, he now vowed that if these actions are perceived as faults then they are easily remedied, "for I have no desire ever to open my mouth again upon any question."[59] If only it were true.

[59] John Adams to John Trumbull, March 9, 1790, Reel 115.

CHAPTER THREE

All alone

Adams's vice presidency cannot be fully understood without discussing the development of political parties. From the time of the Constitutional Convention and the heated disputes that occurred there regarding the scale and scope of the emerging national government, it became clear that not everyone agreed on the proper course the country should follow. Compromise was reached on many issues, and the new government of George Washington enjoyed a brief honeymoon period. But that quickly came to an end as important issues arose whose outcomes would dramatically affect the direction of the country. Disagreements occurred more and more frequently and generally stuck to a recurring theme: how much power would the federal government possess. Ideologically based groups began to coalesce into the Federalists and Anti-Federalists (later known as the Democratic-Republicans), and within a matter of years America's first attempt at political partisanship was up and running.

The leaders of these groups were both occupants of Washington's cabinet: The Federalist Secretary of the Treasury Hamilton; and the Republican Secretary of State Jefferson. (Jefferson shared much responsibility for the party with Hamilton's former ally and influential House member, James Madison.) Hamilton and Jefferson fundamentally disagreed about what course the new nation should take. Each believed his way was the only acceptable option and that the opposition would set the country on a path toward ruination. Many attempts were made to head off a complete war between the factions, including President Washington's much repeated request for compromise and cooperation. In the end, even Washington failed to prevent a break.

Hamilton was a nationalist above all else. He was a brilliant economic thinker and admirer of the British system of centralized and powerful government and finance. Hamilton was also a supremely arrogant and ambitious man. He disliked the independent powers of the states, and he was seen by many to be contemptuous of the opinion of ordinary citizens. More than anything, he sought the creation of a powerful central government. Hamilton hoped that stability under Washington's administration might "enable the government to acquire more consistency than the proposed constitution seems to promise for so extended a country. It may then triumph altogether over the state governments and reduce them to an entire subordination." Hamilton envisioned the United States as a great commercial nation with a powerful and uncontested national state. He planned to expand the American economy well beyond its agrarian base. Hamilton believed promoting manufacturing would make the United States independent of foreign nations for military and other essential supplies.[1]

Thomas Jefferson's vision for the country could not have been more different. Jefferson insisted that government existed to protect liberty, not to grasp power for itself, and, therefore, power ought to be diffused throughout many branches and layers of government. He envisioned a great agricultural country stretching across the continent: powerful states linked by shared values, shared history, a shared agricultural interest and mutual affection into an ever-expanding national union. Jefferson believed that the tillers of the soil were the chosen people of God. While he favored powerful states, he recognized that union was essential to create stability for all. Jefferson's ideal national government would guarantee the republican character of each state and oversee the making of new ones; it would maintain a uniform commercial policy; it would protect the whole and coordinate the waging of necessary war; and it would guarantee peace

[1] Noble Cunningham, *Jefferson vs. Hamilton: Confrontations that Shaped a Nation* (Boston: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 68.

between the states.[2] Jefferson wanted Americans to remain a republic of farmers who owned their land. Independence was a critical component of Jefferson's vision and it was important that Americans be reliant on no one. This would ensure their only interest would be in protecting their land and liberty. Jefferson's vision included a modest capital city and seaport towns that mediated foreign trade. But, due to his love of rural values and rugged individualism, there would be few factories or great cities.[3] Jefferson, having lived in France for many years, developed a deep love for their culture and, as a consequence, favored closer relations with France over Britain.

Jefferson was the consummate politician. He was eloquent and elegant. Refined and educated, Jefferson exuded good breeding, and his years in Europe only accentuated his claim as America's Renaissance man. While Hamilton was brilliant and crafty, he was often a blunt instrument, not afraid to bludgeon an opponent to get his way. Jefferson was a smooth operator. He supported partisan members of the press, but did so surreptitiously. He let slip his thoughts on the decisions made by Washington he disliked, but then feigned ignorance. Jefferson also lacked the influence Hamilton possessed over Washington, largely due to Washington's closer ideological alignment with Hamilton. Consequently, Jefferson developed a powerful network of friends outside the government on which he leaned to effect the changes he sought.[4]

This chapter, however, deals with Adams's role, or lack thereof, in the development of parties. Like Washington and many others, Adams had become increasingly distraught over the rise of political divisiveness. That political parties were an evil that could bring the ruination of republican government was doctrine he, along with many others, had long accepted. "There is

---

[2] Paul Johnson, *The Early American Republic, 1789-1829* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 31.
[3] Johnson, 32.
[4] John Ferling, *Adams vs. Jefferson: The Tumultuous Election of 1800* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 69-83.

nothing I dread so much as division of the Republic into two great parties, each arranged under its leader and converting measures in opposition to each other," Adams had observed even before the Revolutionary War ended. Yet this was exactly what had happened. The "turbulent maneuvers" of factions, he now wrote privately, could "tie the hands and destroy the influence" of every honest man with a desire to serve the public good. There was "division of sentiments over everything," he told his son-in-law. "How few aim at the good of the whole, without aiming too much at the prosperity of parts!"[5]

Adams was certainly sympathetic to the Federalist position. He believed in a powerful federal government and in strong and respected national leaders, as the debacle over titles painfully indicated. He believed the new nation needed a strong central government to hold itself together and resist the centrifugal forces that were seeking to pull it apart. Adams fought for the expansion of executive power and for increased presidential power in hiring and firing members of the administration. Adams was also deeply troubled by the Republicans' desire to emulate the French maxims "liberté, égalité and fraternité." Unlike Jefferson, Adams felt his time in Europe provided the example of what America ought to avoid becoming. Whereas to Jefferson France represented much for America to strive towards, to Adams France represented the dangerous possibility if republican ideals were followed to their logical, chaotic conclusion.[6]

In other respects, though, Adams was suspicious of the Federalist agenda. He was wary of the economic vision for America championed by Hamilton. Adams was the proud son of a farmer, and, though he was a Harvard-educated lawyer, he always saw himself as a simple farmer. He cherished the hard-driving Puritan work ethic that was typical of many New

---

[5] John Adams to William Smith, May 20, 1790: Reel 372 as found in David McCullough, *John Adams* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001), 422.

[6] Gordon Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1969), 580-589.

Englanders. He saw farming and the agricultural vision for the nation advocated by Jefferson as honest and essential to creating and sustaining a self-sufficient nation.[7] While he was an educated professional, Adams was never wealthy. His money existed in acres, not dollars, and he was deeply suspicious of bankers, financial schemes and what he saw as the unmitigated power of the wealthy. Hamilton's desire to build a country of factories instead of farms never sat well with the Vice President.[8]

Adams also loathed the method of Hamilton's political process. He abhorred the destructive politics that both parties embraced, and he never engaged in, nor approved of, the political maneuvers employed by either side. Adams fought passionately for individual issues that he felt were important, but he did not simplify these issues into one Federalist ideological slate, lock, stock and barrel. Adams never contributed money to the partisan press and passionately hated most newspapermen.[9] His own experience as a favorite victim no doubt colored this disgust, for he always saw the press as simpleminded purveyors of gossip and lies.

Adams claimed to be "astonished at the blind spirit of party" which appeared to have gripped "the whole soul of Jefferson." He feared that, "There was not a Jacobin in France more devoted to faction" than his former friend.[10] In theory, Jefferson deplored faction no less than did Adams. In practice, however, he was proving remarkably adept at party politics and remarkably hypocritical to Adams. As always, he avoided open dispute, debate, controversy, or any kind of confrontation, but behind the scenes he was unrelenting and extremely effective. To Jefferson his behavior was a matter of necessity, given his hatred of Hamilton and all that was riding on the

---

[7] Francis Russell, *Adams: An American Dynasty* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002), 10-16.
[8] James Grant, *John Adams: Party of One* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005), 268.
[9] McCullough, 435.
[10] John Adams to Abigail Adams, December 28, 1792, "Letterbook," *Microfilms of The Adams Papers* (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1955): Reel 375.

decisions being made and the effect they would have on the nation's future. To Adams, Jefferson had become a fanatic.[11]

The clash that eventually occurred between Adams and Jefferson was one of conflicting worldviews. While Adams's dispute with Hamilton was in part ideological, it occurred in large part due to differences in political style. In both cases, the quarrels were more than petty squabbles among political prima donnas. They were profound disagreements over the nature of politics and humanity. Jefferson was an optimist and believed Americans were capable of forging a new world. The old power dynamics which had existed in Europe could be abolished in America. He believed the Revolution had created a moment of immense possibility during which society could be reshaped.[12] Adams, on the other hand, was exceedingly pessimistic about the revolutionary fervor he saw sweeping the country. He felt that those who envisioned a break with the past, and a fundamental transformation of human society, were naïve. Such utopian visions ought to be seen as the illusions he was sure they were. The same kind of class conflicts that had long bedeviled the rest of the world would, to some degree, also afflict the United States.[13] Adams believed the seeds of such competition were planted in human nature itself.

Like Jefferson, many Americans felt the Revolution had begat a new world, a republican world. This would mean more than a change in governmental structure. As Gordon Wood describes, there was a moral dimension to this change.[14] The Revolution was now seen as paving the way for a utopian society. By declaring independence. Americans had demonstrated that they were a fundamentally different people. Jefferson and others believed America had broken the mold cast for centuries by Europeans. Americans had experienced an awakening and, as Thomas

---

[11] McCullough, 443.
[12] Wood, 46-53.
[13] Wood, 587-592.
[14] Wood, 46-49.

Paine described, the revolution had been so complete that, "we now see with other eyes; we hear with other ears; and think with other thoughts, than those we formerly used."[15]

The problem was that Adams still saw the world through the same, ever-aging eyes. Years later he wrote to a friend that he had "never understood" what a republic was, and "no other man ever did or ever will." He declared that a republic "may signify any thing, every thing, or nothing." As Wood writes, these words represented "the bewilderment of a man whom ideas had passed by."[16] Adams did not believe a new world had been created or that Americans were fundamentally different than they had been only a few years prior. He instead held fast to British ways of structuring society. He praised the British Constitution, admired the British deference to authority and corresponding political order and sought to bring many of Parliament's practices to the Senate. This traditional view of politics put Adams at odds with the radical ideas of Jefferson.

Does this clash of philosophies not then diminish the importance of personality? After all, philosophical differences appear to have little to do with an individual's character. However, drawing a line between personality and ideology is a more difficult task than it may first appear. Adams's beliefs made him jaded to what humans were capable of accomplishing, while Jefferson remained eternally hopeful. Jefferson's idealism contrasted with Adams's cynicism reveals not only philosophical differences, but divergences of personality as well. The interconnectedness of principles and personality is important in understanding the bitter political break that was to come.

***

The development of the partisan press deserves mention since many of the battles taking place between Hamilton and Jefferson appeared in print. The vicious charges and counter

---

[15] Wood, 48.
[16] Wood, 50.

charges were splashed across various front pages daily, and as the years went by the rancor grew worse. Jefferson had a close relationship with several Republican newspapermen during his time both in and out of office. Jefferson, along with Madison, helped Philip Freneau establish the *National Gazette* in Philadelphia to counteract the influence of John Fenno's *Gazette of the United States*, which enjoyed the considerable printing business of Hamilton's Treasury Department. This was one way both men supported the partisan press, awarding lucrative government printing contracts for the departments they controlled to the papers of their choice. Besides this indirect support, Fenno is alleged to have received cash directly from Hamilton. Jefferson not only awarded contracts to Freneau's press but also directly employed Freneau as a part-time translating clerk in the State Department. Jefferson also encouraged others to give money to support Freneau's paper even if he himself never personally contributed.[17] This same tactic was used by Jefferson later to assist Benjamin Franklin Bache's (Ben Franklin's bastard son) *Philadelphia Aurora*. The paper was in danger of failure because it "totters for want of subscriptions," and Jefferson told Madison that "we should really exert ourselves to procure them, for if these papers fall, republicanism will be entirely brow-beaten."[18]

Adams kept Abigail up to date on the actions of Bache and Freneau whom he referred to as "Our anti-federal scribblers." In one letter, Adams discussed their apparent fondness of rotation. He noted that recently, "they seem disposed to remove their abuse from me to the President." Adams continued, "Bache's paper, which is nearly as bad as Freneau's, begins to join in concert with it to maul the President." Though upset over the abuse inflicted on Washington, Adams noted that, "I may be expected to be an advocate for a rotation of objects of abuse and for equality in this particular." After all, he had been the principal victim of their attacks for years, or

---

[17] Cunningham, 77.

[18] Thomas Jefferson, April 26, 1798, "To James Madison," *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson Volume 30*, ed. Barbara B. Oberg, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 300.

as Adams put it, "I have held the office of Libellee General long enough." In a clear jab at the values cherished by the papers, he felt it fitting that "the burden of it ought to be participated and equalized according to modern republican principles."[19]

Not surprisingly, many of the harshest attacks on Hamilton's economic policies – and some of the more biting comments directed against Washington – came from the *National Gazette*. Adams fumed that "The Hellhounds are now in full cry in the newspapers against the President whom they treat as ill as ever they did me."[20] Coming from a man previously anointed the "first spawn of hell," that was saying something. Adams laid the blame at the feet of James Callender, a writer for Bache's *Aurora*, whom he referred to as, "The Same insolent and impudent Irishman who is said to have written so much against me."[21] Adams was wrong about his heritage (Callender was actually Scottish) but had the last laugh when years later Callender was convicted of, and sentenced to jail for, maliciously defaming President Adams in violation of the recently enacted Alien and Sedition Acts.[22] Due to his indirect support of the operation, Jefferson was held responsible by some Federalists for having a hand in the attacks on the president and the administration in which he served. The most vicious assaults, however, were aimed at Hamilton, whom Freneau delighted in vilifying, and, to add to the insults, such diatribes were nearly always accompanied by lavish praise for Jefferson.[23] While Washington claimed to disregard newspaper abuse, the vitriol in some *Gazette* attacks eventually prompted him to privately ask that Jefferson intercede with Freneau and remove him from the State Department's

---

[19] John Adams to Abigail Adams, January 2, 1794: Reel 377.
[20] John Adams to Abigail Adams, January 24, 1793: Reel 376.
[21] John Adams to Abigail Adams, January 24, 1793: Reel 376.
[22] James Smith, "Sedition in the Old Dominion: James T. Callender and the Prospect Before Us", *The Journal of Southern History: Vol. 20, No. 2*, (May, 1954), 157-182.
[23] McCullough, 435.

payroll. Jefferson insisted that Freneau and his paper were saving the country from ruin and persuaded Washington that it would be a grave misstep to impede on freedom of the press.[24]

***

The growing animosity between Jefferson and Hamilton and the larger split between the two factions would finally burst forth publicly in the spring of 1791 following Jefferson's response to Adams's publication of a series of essays innocuously titled "Discourses on Davila." This publication and Jefferson's reaction would for the first time air in public the growing split not only between the Federalists and Republicans but between Jefferson and the Vice President. As the break became more apparent, the isolation of Adams and his office would increase. By appearing in the press as a critic of Adams and the administration, Jefferson would pull back the curtains on the developing feud.

What prompted Adams's writing of "Davila" was the outbreak of the French Revolution. Jefferson, with his deep attachment to France and his romantic notions about revolutions, embraced the French Revolution with open arms. Adams, holding a very different set of preconceptions, rejected it. Adams felt strongly that there could be no mistaking the French Revolution for the American one. He was philosophically opposed to the ideals advocated by the leaders of the French uprising. As time passed, he was further repulsed by the excesses, brutality, and cowardice of the leaders of the Revolution and was sure that it would end terribly.[25] The way he chose to convey his disapproval shows Adams in all his wisdom, magnanimity, pomposity and impulsiveness. The dissertations were amazingly prophetic as Adams predicted the mayhem and violence that would soon grip France. His characterization of the leaders of the Revolution as rabble-rousers, while initially viewed as monarchical slander, was also largely borne out with

[24] McCullough, 435.
[25] Grant, 362-370

time. However insightful the essays may have been, they were also totally out of step with the political mood of the country. Much like his well-reasoned argument in favor of titles, Adams's undoing came in his execution. His tone was arrogant and preachy, like a father lecturing an immature and impulsive child. Looking back, he appears vindicated. While today Adams might seem a sage, his lack of political finesse at the time ensured that, in the eyes of his contemporaries, he remained a sucker. "Discourses" would eventually bring down on Adams the wrath of those Republicans who had not already taken offense at his other actions.

On April 28, 1790 the first "Davila" essay appeared, buried on page four of the *Gazette*. As Adams would come to regret, no such obscurity was provided for the culminating essay which would appear on page one.[26] Adams's title was an arcane reference to the little known seventeenth-century French author and historian Enrico Caterino Davila. Davila wrote "Historia delle guerre civili di Francia," an 1,800 page tome cataloging the French civil wars of the late sixteenth century. To Adams, the news from France was obviously analogous to the events discussed in Davila's chronicle. Davila had provided for Adams a clear trajectory of where the current revolution would ultimately end. France, by throwing off one kind of tyranny, was only begetting another. This message was not so subtly repeated by the Latin motto which appeared beneath the title of each essay: "Felix, quem faciunt aliena pericula cautum" (Happy is he who learns from others' misfortunes).[27]

His thoughts filled thirty-two essays spanning twelve months. No one had trouble guessing the intended message of the pontifications or their author. "A death bed, it is said, shows the emptiness of titles," wrote the "anonymous" author. "But does it not equally show the futility of riches, power, liberty, and all earthly things?" A year after the loss of his battle to have

---

[26] Grant, 365.
[27] An American Citizen [John Adams], *Discourses on Davila. A Series of Papers on Political History* (Boston: Russell and Cutler, 1805), 9.

the president christened "His Elective Majesty," Adams was back again, reformulating his original arguments.[28] From the very beginning it was clear to all who the author was.

Adams wrote:

> Mankind found by experience, government necessary to the preservation of their lives, liberties and properties, from the injustice of one another. They tried all possible experiments of elections of Governors and Senates: But that they had found so much diversity of opinion and sentiment among them. So much emulation in every heart, so many rivalries among the principal men, such divisions, confusions and miseries, that they had almost unanimously been convinced that hereditary succession was attended with fewer evils than frequent elections. This is the true answer, and the only one, as I believe.[29]

He appeared to be a monarchist and Adams's greatest apostasy was his oft-repeated assertion that the people, unchecked and unbalanced, were as tyrannical as any tyrant. So great was the furor over "Davila" number 32 that Adams chose not to attempt a follow up.

It is easy for Adams's actions and general governmental philosophy to appear absurd. They were not; they were, however, anachronistic. However unpopular his views were, they were nothing new. In fact, they were quite old. As Wood discusses, Adams was seemingly immune to the new thoughts that surrounded him concerning government. As the new ideas emerged and grew more influential, Adams responded by retreating further back into history and clinging tighter to the classical theory of mixed government. Belief in the infallibility of "the people" was anathema to Adams who advocated instead the Aristotelian view of a government

---

[28] An American Citizen [John Adams], 32.
[29] Zoltan Haraszti, "The 32nd Discourse on Davila", *The William and Mary Quarterly: Third Series, Vol. 11, No. 1*, (Jan., 1954), 89-92; also see James Grant, *John Adams: Party of One* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005), 366.

where power was divided between the one, the few and the many. This view recognized what Adams saw as a natural stratification present in all societies. It was only right that the structure of government reflect the innate differences of its citizenry by combining a strong, solitary executive, an aristocratic body and a democratic body. Adams stressed the importance of all three for they all "must be balanced, or one will oppress the other." Belief in a natural aristocracy and inherent inequality was contrary to every Republican ideal. Adams's belief in "distinctions which no art or policy, no degree of virtue or philosophy can ever wholly destroy" colored his every action and can explain some of his intransigence over titles. The widening chasm between Adams and his countrymen frustrated him but compelled him to proclaim his traditional beliefs ever more shrilly. He warned of creating a tyranny of the people and pleaded with his fellow Americans not to blindly embrace "a Republicanism which they understand not."[30]

As "Davila" drew to a close, Thomas Paine's "The Rights of Man" made landfall in America. Jefferson had been given a copy of the pamphlet and was to send his copy to a printer in Philadelphia for mass circulation. Attached to the pamphlet Jefferson wrote a note expressing his pleasure that the work was to be reprinted. The printer, not realizing the comments were privileged, quoted the Secretary as writing: "I am extremely pleased to find it will be reprinted here, and that something is at length to be public said against the political heresies which had sprung up among us."[31] Jefferson had indeed written these words, but he had not intended them for publication. He did approve of Paine's pamphlet and could not now disavow the remark. What caused the Secretary much embarrassment was that it was widely assumed that "the political heresies" referred to the writings of "Davila," which had obviously been written by Adams. Jefferson surely knew this and, in a letter to Madison, admitted just that: "I tell the writer

[30] Wood, 580-589.
[31] Cunningham, 64.

freely that he is a heretic, but certainly never mean to step into a public newspaper with that in my mouth."[32]

But it was not Jefferson who would suffer abuse and ridicule in the press. It was Adams, and the damage done was extreme, given the overwhelming popularity of both Thomas Paine and the French Revolution. Adams was lambasted in the press ever more vigorously now that the Secretary of State appeared to have publicly rebuked him. This gave permission to the press to increase their attacks on the vice president. This also led to increased criticism of the Federalists in general as many Republicans viewed Adams's "Davila" as representative of the views of most Federalists. However, the Federalists wanted no part of the affair, and Hamilton later disavowed any connection to the rants of "Davila." Adams was attacked by the Republicans and could seek no shelter among the circled Federalist wagons.

From this point on, Adams and Jefferson were seldom perceived as anything other than archrivals. A few short letters circulated between the two men following the publication of Jefferson's comments but no understanding was ever reached. Jefferson attempted an apology while simultaneously blaming the printer for acting without permission and Federalists for mistakenly assuming Adams was the intended target. Jefferson told Adams he had not been in his mind when he wrote those remarks. From then on there would be little discussion between Jefferson and Adams of their diverging views. To Jefferson, Adams had become an embarrassment and, while always pleasant in social encounters, Jefferson had as little as possible to do with him. This meant that there would be no precedent established of an engaged vice president serving as a trusted advisor. Had the personal dynamics been different, Adams might have dispensed expert advice to a colleague in need of hearing it. Sadly, on matters of foreign

---

[32] Cunningham, 64.

relations, where Adams's judgment could have been of value, Jefferson would never seek his counsel nor include him in deliberations.[33]

Adams, on the other hand, was horrified by the spectacle. He was embarrassed but, more importantly, unnerved by the vitriolic atmosphere of Philadelphia and the pleasure he believed some took in the increasingly frequent disputes. He saw the disagreements not as honest arguments among patriots but as bitter, self-serving disputes among the ambitious. "The Stupidity of Multitudes of good Friends of their Country and its government is astonishing."[34] Did they not understand the harm they were causing and the breaks that would never heal? Adams condemned the behavior of both Federalists and Republicans, believing they all had been "carried away with every Wind of Doctrine and every political Lye [sic]."[35] The leaders of these factions represented many of the traits so in opposition to the staid New Englander. They were impulsive, tempestuous, irrational and overly emotional. The Puritan in Adams was viscerally repulsed.

As the politics of the time changed and the mood of the citizenry shifted, Adams was left behind. While he was philosophically opposed to political parties, there may have been more to Adams's refusal to embrace them. Wood argues that the nature of politics in the new republic had changed. While most countries had endured contests between rulers and the ruled, America would face struggles among the people themselves. Groups would attempt to gain control of the nation "to create inequality out of their equality."[36] Wood argues that the politicians who criticized political division did so because they did not understand the momentous change in politics which the Revolution had produced. The savvy had come to recognize that division was

---

[33] McCullough, 422-433.
[34] John Adams to John Quincy Adams, December 26, 1792: Reel 375.
[35] Ibid.
[36] Wood, 608.

inevitable. Successful politicians in this new atmosphere would need to learn to reconcile differences, not transcend them. Adams had been in Europe for nearly a decade before assuming the vice presidency and, for a variety of reasons, never grasped the changes that had occurred in the country during his absence. His strategy would remain one of transcendence, and he would spend the rest of his career vainly attempting to float above the political fray.

***

While the "Davila" episode brought into view the antipathy Jefferson and his Republicans held towards Adams and those they labeled as the Federalists, the break between Jefferson and Hamilton became obvious a year later. The split between the two spelled trouble for Washington's administration, specifically, his vice president. The attacks were already vicious, and that was while both were still members of the same administration. Once they left, all restraint left with them. This lack of restraint led to increasingly harsh attacks towards many, Adams chief among them. Washington tried mightily to prevent the break and preserve stability in his cabinet while Adams watched aghast as it unfolded. The increasing differences between Hamilton and Jefferson were sharply revealed in a series of letters written throughout 1792.

Writing to Washington in May 1792, Jefferson expressed concern over Hamilton's handling of several issues. The Secretary of the Treasury was responsible for dangerous financial polices, mounting public debt and leading a corrupt squadron in Congress. Jefferson expressed a general anxiety about the future of the union as long as Hamilton remained in power. In the letter to Washington, Jefferson expressed his fear that the Federalists sought to use the new government as a stepping stone to monarchy. An early and indisputable example of the importance and self-identification of faction occurred when Jefferson professed his alignment

with "the republican party," which he characterized as those "who wish to preserve the government in its present form."[37]

Washington, as usual, played the peacemaker. His response to Jefferson's letter was measured and conciliatory. He detested faction and warned the country repeatedly of its disastrous potential and sought to avoid his two most visible cabinet members becoming the poster boys for all that he most feared. The president suggested that "there were suspicions against a particular party [Hamilton] which had been carried a great deal too far." Washington hoped such dissatisfaction was contained within the capital and "did not believe that the discontents extended far beyond the seat of government." Trying to end on a positive note Washington reassured Jefferson that in all his travels he had found "the people contented and happy."[38] The implied threat of the letter was that Washington expected it to stay that way.

At around the same time, Hamilton wrote his own letter to a friend expressing his growing frustration towards his former ally Madison and his new nemesis Jefferson. "It was not 'till last session that I became unequivocally convinced of the following truth – That Mr. Madison cooperating with Mr. Jefferson is at the head of a faction decidedly hostile to me and my administration." The views advocated by the Republicans, in his opinion, were "subversive of the principles of good government and dangerous to the union, peace and happiness of the Country." The fact that Hamilton clearly recognized his opposition shows how stark the political battle lines must have been. It is also telling that Hamilton refers to his critics as those attacking "his" administration. Washington was mentioned several times in the course of the letter but was

---

[37] Thomas Jefferson, May 23, 1792, "Letter to George Washington," *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson Volume 23*, ed. John Catanzariti, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 535-540.
[38] Thomas Jefferson, July 10, 1792, "Notes on a Conversation with George Washington," *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson Volume 24*, ed. John Catanzariti, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 210-212.

incidental to the issues Hamilton worried over. In the course of the long letter describing the political climate and characters of the time, Adams did not warrant a single mention.[39]

Much like Jefferson before, Hamilton found cause to write Washington to complain about what he saw as the danger posed by Jefferson to the new nation. Washington again called for harmony within his cabinet. Washington recognized that "Differences in political opinions are unavoidable," he wrote, but he regretted that subjects could not be discussed without impugning the motives of opponents. He expressed his hope that "liberal allowances will be made for the political opinions of one another; and instead of wounding suspicions, and irritating charges... there might be mutual forbearances" shown by both men.[40] Washington wrote that he had given the same advice to other officers of the government (meaning Jefferson) because "the Attacks which have been made upon almost all the measures of government, and most of its Executive Officers, have for a long time past, filled me with painful sensations; and cannot fail I think, of producing unhappy consequences at home and abroad."[41] Washington was using his personal influence and prestige to keep open war from breaking out between two of his most valuable officials. Sadly for Washington, his personal influence was not enough to keep the two civil. A complete breakdown between the two was in the offing.

Adams feared that this feud might result in damage to Washington. He believed Jefferson's looming break with the administration would be the opportunity Republicans had been waiting on to launch a full scale assault on the President. "The Antifederalists and the frenchified Zealots have nothing now to do, that I can conceive of but to ruin his character

---

[39] Alexander Hamilton, May 26, 1792, "Letter to Edward Carrington," *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton: Volume XI,* ed. Harold C. Syrett, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 426-438.
[40] Washington to Hamilton, August 26, 1792, ibid., 276-277.
[41] Ibid.

destroy his Peace, and injure his health."[42] Adams would hold Jefferson personally responsible if such attacks occurred. By early 1793 the break had become irreparable and Adams lamented the state of the union. "Nearly one half the Continent is in constant opposition to the other."[43] The Secretary of the Treasury and the Secretary of State were under constant fire from one another. Jefferson had begun a campaign to drive Hamilton from office. Initially unwilling to attack Hamilton directly or to write under an assumed name, Jefferson was not above urging others to do so. "For God's sake, my dear sir," Jefferson would admonish Madison, "take up your pen, select the most striking heresies, and cut him to pieces in the face of the public."[44]

That spring, however, Jefferson took a more direct role in the campaign. Jefferson drafted a resolution intended to force Hamilton from office which detailed a list of ten reasons why Hamilton was not fit for the job and, rather than present the complaint himself, had a Republican ally in the House propose the resolution. The final point of the resolution read as follows: "Resolved, That the Secretary of the Treasury has been guilty of maladministration in the duties of his office, and should, in the opinion of Congress, be removed from his office by the President of the United States."[45] No more furtive editorials, backhanded anonymous essays or letters of complaint. Jefferson's purpose was clear but his attempt to destroy Hamilton failed. The obviously politically driven charges inspired a great deal of controversy and division within Congress and, when the resolution was put to a vote, Hamilton's allies saw to its sound defeat.

Adams could be counted among those in Hamilton's corner. Always giving him the benefit of the doubt, it took many years and many more betrayals before Adams recognized Hamilton for what he was. Commenting on Jefferson's resolution, Adams sarcastically wrote

---

[42] John Adams to Abigail Adams, January 9, 1794: Reel 377.
[43] Ibid.
[44] McCullough, 442.
[45] Thomas Jefferson, "Resolutions on the Secretary of the Treasury," *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson Volume 25*, ed. John Catanzariti, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 292-293.

that, "Both Houses of Congress are making strict Inquisition into the Treasury: with upright and patriotic Views no doubt." Perhaps recognizing the parallels between his and Hamilton's situation he noted that the Secretary "will find no more mercy than is due from a generous nation to a faithful servant." Despite the inquisition that was sure to take place, Adams did not believe Hamilton had anything to fear. Instead, he thought the episode might serve to burnish Hamilton's image: "I presume his Character will Shone the brighter."[46]

Jefferson had long discussed resigning at the end of Washington's first term, and his failure to force Hamilton from office only heightened the desire. He decided to stay on until the end of the year and completed a few important reports that he had been working on for months. During these last months, it is not surprising to note that Jefferson had virtually no contact with Hamilton. The divisiveness and harm that Washington feared faction would bring had come to pass, and his two capable secretaries sulked and sought to destroy one another rather than help lead the country.

Adams did not long lament Jefferson's departure. He believed the recent disputes had brought out Jefferson's true colors and he had not liked what he saw. Writing to Abigail, he acknowledged that Jefferson's "Abilities and general good disposition," cause him to feel some regret at his exit. This regret would be soothed by remembering his many faults such as "his want of Candour, his obstinate Prejudices both of Aversion and Attachment his real Partiality in Spite of all his Pretensions and his low notions about many things." His myriad shortcomings were enough to reconcile Adams to the departure, proclaiming that "I will not weep."[47]

Adams also refused to believe Jefferson's notion of retiring to the solitude of Monticello. Adams admitted that he did not know what Jefferson would busy himself with, perhaps

---

[46] John Adams to Abigail Adams, January 24, 1793: Reel 376.
[47] John Adams to Abigail Adams, December 26, 1793: Reel 376.

becoming governor, "But this I know that if he is neglected at Monticello he will soon… die." Rather than the quiet thinker others saw, "I know he is indolent. and his soul is prisoned with Ambition." Adams recognized years in advance that though Jefferson's plan may be to retire, his ever-increasing reputation would eventually force him to seek the presidency. Adams viewed it not as a possibility but rather a fait accompli: "So be it, if it is thus ordained."[48]

Only a short time later Adams's feelings towards Jefferson grew harsher. Writing to Abigail, Adams informed her that, "Jefferson went off Yesterday, and a good riddance of bad ware." He railed against Jefferson's temper and unreasonable principles. Jefferson's embrace of faction and dissent was unforgivable given the fragile state of the country. "He has Talents I know, and Integrity I believe: but his mind is now poisoned with Passion Prejudice and Faction." Adams wished what was perhaps the worst possible ill on the Secretary, writing that "I am almost tempted to wish he may be chosen Vice President at the next Election." Adams felt the vice presidency would be a fitting place for a man of Jefferson's unbridled ambition, "for there he could do neither good nor harm."[49]

After surviving the attempted coup d'etat, Hamilton would stay in office a year longer than Jefferson. His post no longer held the attraction it once had, and the many important decisions that existed before had now been made and important precedents established. Now routine and mundane tasks needed to be performed which lacked in excitement. In January 1795 Hamilton sent his final report to Congress and, with it, his notice of resignation. Though both men were out of office, neither would retire to a quiet country life. Each retained his leadership

[48] John Adams to Abigail Adams, December 26, 1793: Reel 376.
[49] John Adams to Abigail Adams, January 6, 1794: Reel 377.

of his party network and remained a thorn in each other's, and Adams's, side for many years to come.[50]

It was with a thorn in each side that Adams was left to serve out the remainder of his time in office. He endured a political situation few of his contemporaries were forced to. Though Washington similarly refused to embrace faction, his virtually unassailable reputation put him largely out of reach of the political attacks his vice president would suffer. In a relatively short period of time the new nation had gone from largely united to deeply divided. Most public figures, in keeping with the spirit of the times, fell in line behind either Hamilton or Jefferson. Adams, however, refused. This self-induced political exile left the Vice President with little influence over the new nation. By refusing to embrace a party as his own, Adams chose to forsake the powerful networks of supporters which would prove so valuable to his colleagues. He lacked the party machinery necessary to consolidate power for himself and his office. The farther removed Adams became from the political sphere the closer both he, and his office, drifted toward obscurity.

[50] Cunningham, 113.

CHAPTER FOUR

Adams's absence

In some instances, Adams's actions were responsible for his ultimate lack of success. The fight over titles is one such example. Adams was obnoxious and indefatigable, and his endless pontificating caused him trouble. In other cases, however, it was Adams's inaction that was the source of his problems. His decision to absent himself from some of the most important political debates of the age diminished his, and his office's, relevance. The debates over the permanent location of the capital and the assumption of state debts, the Nootka Sound episode and the suppression of the Whiskey Rebellion all provide examples, not of Adams's over-action, but his inaction. Adams's apathy is placed in even starker relief by the behavior of other important figures. Washington, Hamilton, Jefferson and Madison each played important roles in the above fights, while Adams was often a political fifth wheel.

Adams's inaction was not the result of some sudden loss of interest on his part. His behavior is better understood by placing it in the context of the political defeats he suffered early on in his tenure. He was castigated by friend and foe alike to maintain a lower profile, and he did just that. What appeared to be indifference may have been his way of practicing the restraint many urged upon him. He had been bruised by his earlier forays into the political fray, and his irritation with the office increased. He found the vice presidency more irksome than ever, and the mood he expressed in letters to his wife was one of resignation. He felt the office was, "though laborious... wholly insignificant."[1] The defeats suffered by Adams during the First Congress, the

---

[1] John Adams to John Trumbull, January 23, 1791, "Correspondence," *The Works of John Adams Volume IX*, ed. Charles Adams, (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1854), 573.

scathing treatment he had received in the partisan press and his growing estrangement from former friends as the political climate in Philadelphia grew more divisive combined to make him more morose than ever. He succinctly summed up his feelings towards the office when he wrote that, "My own is a situation of such complete insignificance that I have scarcely the power to do good or evil."[2]

In addition to his mental exhaustion, another contributing factor in Adams's apathy was his physical health. He considered his powerlessness fitting considering his state of fatigue, complaining that, "my eyes and hands and nerves are almost worn out."[3] His teeth tormented him – it had been necessary to have several pulled – and he complained of a tremor in his hand. Due to changing fashions he had given up wearing a wig and what little hair remained on his head had turned quite grey.[4] He was overweight and his eyes were often red and watery from too much reading. So weak were his eyes, such was the trembling of his hand, he told his son, that "a pen is as terrible to me as a sword to a coward."[5] Despite these laments, Adams had not completely deteriorated. He devoted hours each day to reading and still more to keeping up with his voluminous correspondence. He walked religiously and generally covered three to five miles a day.[6]

Adams was also noticeably isolated from the president. He attended few of Washington's formal gatherings and, while he deeply respected Washington the icon, he knew little of him as a person.[7] Adams himself admitted to his wife that concerning a certain foreign policy issue he was completely in the dark about Washington's thoughts: "I know not." Moreover, "I have been

---

[2] John Adams to John Trumbull, January 23, 1791, *Works Volume IX*, 574.
[3] John Adams to John Quincy Adams, December 12, 1793, "Letterbook," *Microfilms of The Adams Papers* (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1955): Reel 115.
[4] David McCullough, *John Adams* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001), 450.
[5] John Adams to John Quincy Adams, December 12, 1793: Reel 115.
[6] McCullough, 453.
[7] Page Smith, *John Adams: Volume II 1784-1826* (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1962), 745.

afraid to ask questions or make Observations to any body lest I should be thought to be too much interested."[8] This stiff and sporadic contact with Washington meant he had little influence over the president's decisions. A relationship with the president provided the political currency necessary to influence the national agenda. It was clear to some that, in this respect, Adams was bankrupt.

In June of 1790 the French diplomat, Louis-Guillaume Otto, summing up the situation in New York for his government, reported just that. Otto concluded that if Washington had an heir apparent, it would have to be Jefferson and that the influence and importance of the Vice President was "nil." He went on: "It appears certain at present that he [Adams] will never be President and that he will have a very formidable competitor in Mr. Jefferson," who, Otto concluded, possessed more talent and intelligence.[9] While this may be a misreading of the political climate by an outsider, a rundown of Adams's contributions to several important issues that arose during his tenure appears to validate Otto's assessment.

***

During the summer of 1790, Congress considered two issues sure to be of long-lasting consequence. The first was the question of where to locate the national capital. It had been a topic of rancorous discussion since the summer before, and was again at the forefront. The second was a proposal for the federal government to assume the debts incurred by the states during the Revolutionary War as well as to create a national bank.

The "assumption" plan was the work of Alexander Hamilton, who, since his appointment, had swiftly made the Treasury a powerful department. In this dispute Hamilton counted on the continuance of his political and personal friendship with James Madison. They

---

[8] John Adams to Abigail Adams, January 9, 1794: Reel 377.
[9] McCullough, 423.

had previously worked together to ensure the ratification of the Constitution. As it would turn out, that alliance was an aberration, a unique moment when both men's interests aligned. In the debate over assumption, Madison would lead congressional opposition to Hamilton's proposals. Madison's efforts coincided with those of Jefferson. Both insisted that Hamilton's schemes would be responsible for dismantling the country and the goals of the Revolution.[10]

Hamilton's recommendation for the assumption of state debts saw enormous opposition, and he worked tirelessly to push his plan's enactment. Adams's opinion on the subject remained a mystery to most of the country. He preferred to spill his thoughts to Abigail. He was skeptical of the proposal, specifically the bank. Adams conceded that creating one national bank under strict governmental control "would be useful." "But," he warned, "the state legislatures have multiplied Banks to such a degree that one knows not how far the evil has already gone nor where it will stop."[11] Throughout the congressional debate, Hamilton firmly defended his proposal and almost single-handedly went to work creating a coalition to achieve victory. William Maclay reported that it was common for Hamilton to arrive "here early to wait on the speaker, and spend most of his time running from place to place among the Members."[12] During the following week, Maclay recorded in his diary that "Hamilton literally speaking is moving heaven and Earth in favour of his System."[13] While Hamilton was moving heaven and Earth, Adams was uninvolved.

Contention over the location of the permanent capital reached a peak in June. For weeks proposals for locations were floated and shot down. Beds were brought in for ill members to lie on so they would be available to stymie unacceptable options. The Potomac was proposed and

---

[10] Paul Johnson, *The Early American Republic, 1789-1829* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007) 37.
[11] John Adams to Abigail Adams, January 12, 1794: Reel 377.
[12] William Maclay, "Hamilton's Machines," *The Diary of William Maclay and Other Notes on Senate Debates*, ed. Kenneth R. Bowling, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), 194.
[13] Ibid., 200.

defeated, and then in succession Baltimore and Wilmington. All the while Adams struggled vainly to keep order, but the excitement was beyond his ability to control. On June 8th, a vote to adjourn was carried, and the uproar terminated with the issue still unresolved.[14]

When debate resumed, Hamilton proposed yet another potential location: Germantown, Pennsylvania. This proposal was made in exchange for the support of the Pennsylvania delegation for Hamilton's assumption plan. Word then spread that Hamilton was negotiating with the Maryland delegation and that Baltimore would be made the capital in return for their support.[15] After several more days of negotiations that amounted to nothing, Jefferson became involved.

Jefferson played a critical role in the final resolution of the issue after running into Hamilton outside the President's house in New York in mid June. Hamilton, according to Jefferson, did not look good: "somber, haggard, & dejected beyond despair, even his dress uncouth & neglected." Jefferson worried about the divisive debate over the capital and wanted resolution to the problem. The best way to achieve this conciliation, he concluded, "would be to bring Mr. Madison and Colo. Hamilton to a friendly discussion of the subject." Playing matchmaker, Jefferson "immediately wrote to each to come and dine with me the next day, mentioning that we should be alone."[16] The bait-and-switch worked and Madison and Hamilton met to reach an agreement.

Hamilton believed assumption was crucial to the continued financial health of the country and was willing to concede the issue of the capital's location to achieve success. To get Jefferson's and Madison's support Hamilton agreed to their request that the capital be moved

---

[14] Maclay, *Diary*, 285.
[15] McCullough, 426.
[16] Thomas Jefferson, *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson Volume 17*, ed. Barbara B. Oberg, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 205-208.

south to a site on the Potomac River. This was a major concession. Hamilton had wanted the capital to be in either New York or Philadelphia to tie northeastern "moneyed men" to the federal government. If either city were chosen, then political and economic power might be concentrated there as it was in Paris and London, achieving the centralized power that Hamilton so desperately sought. Jefferson and Madison and their Republicans hated the idea and the cabals that would surely evolve from such an arrangement. They accepted the assumption of state debts in return for removal of the capital to the South. The compromise went to the heart of their Republican ideals. It distanced commercial wealth from the federal government and would ensure that the capital of the United States would be in an unimportant place.[17]

Looking back on the bargain later, Jefferson came to regret his role and felt he had been duped by Hamilton. Jefferson concluded the whole affair was "unjust, in itself oppressive to the states, and was acquiesced in merely from a fear of disunion, while our government was still in its most infant state." Jefferson believed he had acted out of a genuine concern for the welfare of the country but had instead unwittingly "enabled Hamilton so to strengthen himself by corrupt services to many."[18] He denounced the scheme as "a contrivance invented for the purposes of corruption, and for assimilating us in all things to the rotten as well as the sound parts of the British model."[19]

Hamilton had no such regret over the part he played in the affair and in retrospect, appeared positively gleeful. As Hamilton proclaimed years later, "A mighty stand was made on

---

[17] Johnson, 13-15.
[18] Jefferson, *Papers Volume 17*, 208.
[19] Noble Cunningham, *Jefferson vs. Hamilton: Confrontations that Shaped a Nation* (Boston: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 63.

the affair. There was much commitment in that case. I prevailed."[20] Hamilton suffered none of Jefferson's hand wringing.

In the midst of this consternation, Adams stood by and did little. In the Senate, charges and countercharges were voiced with increasing vehemence. Adams struggled to keep order, apparently with little effect. "John Adams has neither judgment, firmness of mind, nor respectability of deportment to fill the chair of such an assembly," scoffed the less-than-impressed Maclay.[21] As Adams's isolation increased, his desire to control the body he presided over correspondingly diminished. He resigned himself to let others do the fighting while he pined for his wife and his return to Quincy.

The divergence of Hamilton's and Adams's initial political fortunes is stark. While it can correctly be argued that Adams's lack of success had much to do with the institutional unimportance of his office, Hamilton's immense success belies the notion that constitutionally defined power was the only factor that determined one's influence. The Treasury Department was never envisioned as one of immense import. At the time of the office's creation, Secretary of the Treasury would have been a remarkably unimportant position. There was no national financial network, no bank, no system for taxation, no financial infrastructure and little debt to pay off as most states held that debt independently. The Secretary of the Treasury as envisioned was essentially powerless. The office might have continued on in relative obscurity, but because of Hamilton and his championing of a series of major laws, the scope and scale of the office grew enormously. He created a national financial system from scratch and in so doing created important responsibilities for future holders of his office. While this influence over financial

---

[20] Alexander Hamilton, "Private Correspondence", *The Works of Alexander Hamilton: Volume VIII,* ed. Henry Cabot Lodge, (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1904), 261.
[21] William Maclay, "June 6", *Sketches of Debate in the First Senate of the United States, in 1789-90-91,* ed. George W. Harris, (Harrisburg: Lane S. Hart, 1880), 221.

matters would be expected and reasonable. Hamilton was able to become a confidante and trusted advisor to Washington and insinuate himself into decisions totally unrelated to Treasury Department business. He was a force to be reckoned with in nearly every major decision, foreign or domestic. His opinion of himself was never lacking, and later he even referred to Washington's presidency as "my administration."[22] Hamilton provided a wonderful counterexample to Adams, two very different men with very different personalities that led to very different outcomes for themselves and their offices.

***

Foreign policy was an arena in which Adams was well versed. His decade in Europe as an ambassador would have been an important asset for Jefferson as Secretary of State to draw on. Here too, several factors combined to limit Adams's impact. First, Adams again chose to remain detached from the decision making process. He was reluctant to voice any opinion publicly that might be misinterpreted as criticism of the president he so admired. He bit his tongue when he clearly had much to say. Following a series of controversial incidents involving the French Ambassador Edmond-Charles Genêt, more commonly referred to as Citizen Genêt, a friend wrote to ask Adams's opinion on what should be done. Uncharacteristically circumspect, Adams wrote, "The question you bring into view can be decided only by the President." He went further, "I have no Constitutional vote in it. I therefore protest against taking any side in it or having my name or opinion quoted abought [sic] it."[23] Adams was clear that he would not engage publicly even on a subject about which he no doubt possessed strong feelings. He would never risk a perceived disagreement or split with the President whom he praised for his "earnest

[22] Paul Johnson, *The Early American Republic, 1789-1829* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 32.
[23] John Adams to Tench Cox, April 25, 1795: Reel 116.

desire to do right."[24] It was only to Abigail that Adams did reveal his thoughts on Genêt's behavior. "Mr. Genet has been abusive on the President and all his Ministers beyond all measures of decency, or Obligations of Truth," Adams continued, "and in other respects not yet publickly investigated, has been such as to make it difficult to know what to do with him."[25] It was only in private letters to his trusted wife that he felt comfortable revealing the outrage that he stifled in public.

Second, the unfortunate falling out between Jefferson and Adams meant the Vice President's expertise would never be put to use. Instead, Hamilton, a man with almost no foreign policy experience, inserted himself into the middle of a variety of flare-ups. Hamilton found a way to usurp Jefferson's role in an area where Jefferson would rightfully have been seen as the proper authority. As Secretary of State, it should have been Jefferson's job to lead negotiations with foreign powers and, at the very least, be fully informed about the negotiations that were taking place. As the Nootka Sound episode demonstrates, this did not always occur.

The incident took place in the summer of 1789 when Spain seized several British ships off the coast of Canada. By the following spring both countries had prepared for war, which was ultimately averted by France's decision not to ally with Spain. As Britain and Spain readied for war, each sought American assistance, specifically, permission to use American territory to launch attacks against the other's bases. It was critical that the United States walk a fine line and not harm relations with either European power. Such an important diplomatic and foreign policy event would appear to fall within the exclusive purview of the Secretary of State, yet Hamilton played an important role as emissary to the British government minister George Beckwith. On the surface, Hamilton seems to have divulged this connection openly with Washington and

---

[24] John Adams to Abigail Adams, January 9, 1794: Reel 377.
[25] John Adams to Abigail Adams, January 9, 1794: reel 377.

Jefferson. However, by comparing Hamilton's letters to Washington with Beckwith's letters back to England, it soon becomes clear Hamilton's version of events was not the whole truth. There was much he did not feel the need to share with the President or the Secretary.[26]

Both Washington and Jefferson favored the negotiation of a commercial treaty with Great Britain and Spain and wanted to use the crisis to press both for concessions. However, Hamilton preferred a more conciliatory approach, and this is what Beckwith's report indicated. Beckwith also noted that Hamilton had indicated his willingness to intervene in Britain's favor should any difficulties with Jefferson arise.[27] Without Jefferson's knowledge, Hamilton had offered to assist the representative of a foreign power in negotiations with the Secretary of State.[28] Again, the major political figures were involved while Adams was conspicuously missing. Washington, Hamilton, Jefferson and his ally Madison appear as important characters in many of these events, each aggressively pursuing his own agenda. None had qualms about inserting himself into important issues, much to the benefit of his own prestige and that of his office. Adams, out of respect for and deference to Washington, apparently did have such qualms.

The Whiskey Rebellion was a major domestic event, the roots of which are found in a 1791 tax imposed on whiskey. The tax was the brainchild of Hamilton who claimed that he wanted the money raised to pay down the newly assumed state debts. As always, Hamilton had an ulterior motive and wrote that he "wanted the tax imposed to advance and secure the power of the new federal government." Western farmers and frontiersmen despised the tax. Their unhappiness reached a crescendo in the summer of 1794 as civil disobedience threatened to sweep across Pennsylvania. Hamilton wanted to crush the uprising with massive military force. Washington instead placed state militias on alert and dispatched a "peace commission" to

---

[26] Cunningham, 38-42.
[27] Cunningham, 42.
[28] Cunningham, 43.

negotiate an end to the dispute. When talks proved fruitless, Washington acquiesced to Hamilton's view. A force of nearly 13,000 troops, led initially by Washington with Hamilton as his second-in-command, marched into Western Pennsylvania. Encountering almost no organized opposition, Washington remained only a short time before turning control over to Hamilton and Virginia Governor Henry Lee.[29]

Alexander Hamilton was elated. The fledgling federal government had proven it could keep order and solidified its power to enact and enforce laws. But many, in particular Jefferson and Madison, thought that this resort to military force was a dangerous mistake. This further convinced the Republicans that Hamilton was a dangerous man. Jefferson feared Hamilton had become an American Caesar and was seriously concerned that he might attempt to march his army on the capital. Even Adams worried that the army might be used "to proclaim a regal government and place Hamilton as the head of it, and prepare the way for a province of Great Britain."[30]

As Washington and Hamilton marched towards the rebels, Adams had retired for the summer to his home in Quincy. He regularly read the newspapers and was kept abreast of the crisis but this was the extent of his engagement. By the time Adams returned to Philadelphia later that year the Whiskey Rebellion had ended.[31] Adams was away from the capital when the decisions were being made and therefore exercised little influence over the outcome. He was not well versed on military matters and may have felt out of his depth, but so was Jefferson who never let his ignorance prevent him from admonishing the Federalists for the severity of their response. Adams chose to be unengaged. He had been battered and bruised by earlier attempts to intervene into the political sphere. He also lacked a close relationship with the president but still

---

[29] Samuel Morrison, *Oxford History of the United States 1783-1917* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1927), 182.
[30] McCullough, 522.
[31] Johnson, 63.

showed Washington tremendous deference by refusing to state publicly his feelings on many issues. He was fundamentally opposed to the self-serving struggles for power he saw his colleagues engage in. Ultimately, Adams chose isolation rather than participation. Both he and his office suffered as a result. While Hamilton seized the military leadership and Jefferson denounced the brutal show of force, Adams read the paper.

There was a silver lining to Adams's inactivity: an increase in the respect and civility shown to him by those in Philadelphia. Adams noted that his reception had become more cordial in the halls of Congress, and this was welcome news. Sadly, Adams saw this show of respect as a true measure of his insignificance: "They all know that I can do them neither much good nor much harm."[32] By the end of his second term Adams was exhausted. He had served longer than in any other post in his career, and in all he had served with dignity. He was unfailingly loyal to Washington, a person he deeply respected and admired. Though he endured several rough patches, he always acted in what he believed was the best interest of the country. Adams performed his one constitutional duty ably, casting tie-breaking votes in the Senate. In all, his was the deciding voice in thirty-one votes, more than any other vice president in history and always in support of Washington's administration.[33]

---

[32] Letter from John Adams to Abigail Adams, 22 December 1793 [electronic edition]. *Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive.* Massachusetts Historical Society. http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/

[33] McCullough, 460.

EPILOGUE

A Bucket of Dried Concrete

Ultimately, the story of John Adams's vice presidency is not one of immense failure. He was never totally isolated, never utterly friendless, never completely defeated. He just was not as successful as others. His story is, instead, one of unrealized potential. Adams did not inflict damage on the office; he just did little to improve its condition.

In those first years following the Convention a short window of time existed where job responsibilities and power were in flux. The nation was new, the Constitution had to be tested, and everyone needed to find their proper place within the new government. The delegates in Philadelphia had purposely created a broad framework for government and relied on the first inhabitants to sort out the details. The Constitution was theory; practical realities now needed to be dealt with. In this window of time much unclaimed power existed and a free-for-all ensued to see who could capture it and in so doing, expand not only their personal influence but set precedents for their successors to follow. Adams's "failure" was then not in reducing the scope of his office but in not engaging in the struggle. Consequently, the vice presidency missed this crucial moment when the duties and powers of jobs were still fluid and was not able to build upon its constitutionally prescribed foundation. In the scramble for power, Adams and the vice presidency came up short. Rather than provide future vice presidents a precedent of active engagement with the political process, Adams ended up lost in the shuffle. He created the baseline from which future vice presidents would operate. Had a man more politically inclined occupied the office first, that baseline might have been higher.

While some instances recounted in this paper may lead readers to assume that Adams never seized this power due only to his own incompetence, this merely tells part of the story. Adams had his fair share of inglorious moments while in office. His behavior grated on his friends and enraged his detractors. For this lack of political aplomb Adams can be held directly responsible. His hatred of party politics was another personality-related cause for his lack of success. But there were many other factors beyond his personality that contributed to his troubles. The lack of attention paid to the office by delegates at the Constitutional Convention and the resulting structural problems of the office are two such reasons. The development of factions and the eventual split of the nation into ideologically opposed parties is another. A changing national mood away from the British ways embraced by Adams towards all things French and "republican" was yet another stone around Adams's neck. No event, especially not something as complicated as the evolution of a major governmental office, can be simplified to having only one cause. While it is a factor, and maybe even an important factor, his personality did not exist in a vacuum.

Just what that personality was deserves a quick discussion. Some instances, particularly the episode over titles, leave the distinct impression that Adams was a buffoon. He comes off as an insufferable gasbag, inept and adrift. While at times this was true, he was so much more. In many ways Adams's greatest flaws as a politician were his most admirable traits as a man. Adams's lack of the traits that made Hamilton and Jefferson political savants, in my opinion, made him all the more likeable. He was easily outfoxed by these two because he lacked guile. He lost legislative disputes because he was not calculating. He put his foot in his mouth because he was blunt. He made enemies because he told the truth, even when it was politically inconvenient to do so. When the instinct for self-preservation would force most people to abandon their

unpopular opinions, Adams kept on fighting because he believed that what he was doing was right. Writing to a friend many years after leaving office Adams recognized the ideological gulf that had separated him from his countrymen, and was saddened. He felt he had been misunderstood and persecuted from the beginning. "From the year 1761, now more than Fifty years," he lamented, "I have constantly lived in an enemies Country."[1] While Adams appears to have felt sadness he expresses no regret. Ideally his fellow Americans would have recognized the wisdom of his warnings but, regardless, Adams felt duty bound to continue making them.

Even his harshest critics recognized Adams did not take the job for his own aggrandizement; he believed public service was the duty of all honest men. In a letter to his son Thomas, Adams offered this warning: "Public business, my son, must always be done by somebody. If wise men decline it, others will not; if honest men refuse it, others will not." Public service should not be motivated by personal gain, and he advised his son that the goal of any politician "should be to place his honor out of reach of all men."[2] Like all those who deal in history, writers are charged with interpreting events as best they are able. I see Adams as simultaneously great and flawed, ultimately likeable thanks to his irrepressible passion. Adams had his moments of buffoonery but in the end was a man of integrity.

Finally, I want to conclude my discussion of the first vice president with a word about the second. Adams's impact is more fully understood by examining Thomas Jefferson's time in office. Without delving into the chicanery of the 1796 election, suffice it to say that Adams was narrowly elected president. Due to the ill-conceived Twelfth Amendment then in place, his chief opponent, Thomas Jefferson, won the second most electoral college votes and with them the vice

---

[1] Gordon Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1969), 592.
[2] John Adams to Thomas Boylston Adams, September 2, 1789, "Letterbook," *Microfilms of The Adams Papers* (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1955): Reel 115.

presidency.[3] This resulted in a terrible situation that neither man wanted. Being in the same administration with one's political and ideological opposite was a less than ideal situation.

When Jefferson took office in 1796 he was unmistakably the leader of the Republicans. As such, he was philosophically opposed to a powerful, active federal government and had repeatedly sought its limitation. Jefferson wanted the states, especially his beloved Virginia, to have the power in the emerging country. It did not bode well then that the nation's second vice president saw the national government and his office as an affront to the principles of republicanism. He was so unhappy with the political situation in Philadelphia that he left soon after his inauguration and returned to Monticello where he would stay for much of his vice presidency.[4] A vice president seldom in the capital city did not bode well for the office.

Jefferson, despite his protestations to the contrary, did not retire to a life of leisure in the countryside. Though he was many miles away from Philadelphia, he remained very much in the thick of things politically. While he may not have wanted the federal government or his office to be of any importance, he certainly wanted to keep himself as influential as ever. Jefferson, in comparison to Adams, was tremendously powerful and engaged while he was VP. He, and his political confidant Madison, saw to it that he still pulled the party strings from Monticello. Jefferson relied on Madison, the Republicans in Congress, his network of newspapermen along with his gang of fellow aristocratic Virginia planters to ensure he remained a force. On several occasions, he personally intervened in disputes to tip the balance of the scales in favor of the Republicans. He placed himself in the middle of a diplomatic scandal known as the XYZ Affair,

---

[3] Under the system then in place, electors had two votes, but both were for president; the runner-up in the presidential race was elected vice president. Each party intended to manipulate the results by having some of their electors cast one vote for the intended presidential candidate and one vote for somebody besides the intended vice presidential candidate, leaving their vice presidential candidate a few votes shy of their presidential candidate. The result was that too many Adams electors failed to cast their second vote for his vice president, Pinckney, and so Adams was elected president while his opponent, Jefferson, was elected vice president. For information see Ralph Brown, *The Presidency of John Adams* (Wichita: The University Press of Kansas, 1975).

[4] Dumas Malone, *Jefferson and His Time: Volume 3* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1948), 112.

railed against Adams's passage of the Alien and Sedition Acts and attempted to block their enactment by drafting the Kentucky and Virginia Resolutions which proclaimed the right of states to declare laws passed by Congress unconstitutional. In each instance he pulled the levers of power to derail or disrupt the work of Adams and Hamilton's Federalists. These actions paint a picture of an active vice president more than capable of expanding his office.

This picture might appear to present a major problem for my argument. After all, this thesis has maintained that Adams's personality as the first VP created an office of little power that would be handed down to his successors. If, as it seems, the country's second vice president was able to overcome this weakness and forge a powerful and important office, then this argument must be terribly flawed. Maybe. However, Jefferson's many exercises of power, his usurpations of Adams, his obstruction of Hamilton were not done as the vice president; they were not done *through* the vice presidency. The vice presidency and Jefferson's role as vice president were incidental to his power. He was the leader of one of the two political parties in the country. He had numerous personal contacts, loyal political operatives, friends in the legislature and a partisan press to do his bidding. None of these groups came with the vice presidency, none were achieved by being vice president and none were conditional on his continuing in that position. This network of allies existed for years prior to his becoming vice president. Jefferson did not need what little, if any, influence the vice presidency possessed to achieve his ends; he was already powerful and connected by his own making through the political party he led. And even if Jefferson had needed the office of the vice presidency to achieve his ends, he could not have made use of it without being made a fool of by Federalists everywhere. As the leading critic of expanded central government, Jefferson could not now embrace the governmental machinery he supposedly detested without being eviscerated by Hamilton.

As shown in Chapter One, the Constitutional Convention only created the vice presidency to serve as an easy solution to an electoral problem. Little time was spent fleshing out exactly what the office would look like and what powers its occupants would possess. Such problems were left to the office's first inhabitant. As Chapter Two demonstrates, it just so happened that the first inhabitant was a man that, by his own admission, was ill-suited for the job. From his first days in office he floundered. Due to his own stubbornness and lack of acumen he engaged in a fight that would prove damaging. He was not destroyed, he was not friendless in Philadelphia, but he was weakened.

As Chapter Three recounts, this weakness was exacerbated by the growing strength of those around him. Hamilton and Jefferson formed parties and decided issues of immense import to the future of the country. The two waged war with each other, and Adams, refusing to take sides, was caught in the middle. In other cases, such as those discussed in Chapter Four, decisions were made without input from the vice president at all. The permanent location of the capital, the assumption of state debts, the Nootka Sound episode, the handling of the Whiskey Rebellion were issues on which the opinion of Adams was not solicited. Then Adams won the presidency and Jefferson took over, and while Jefferson was incredibly powerful as vice president, that power had little or nothing to do with the fact that he was vice president.

In the end, my argument boils down not to a warm bucket of spit, but to a bucket of wet cement. The intentional vagueness of the Constitution left a largely blank slate, a bucket of wet cement with which the office's first occupant, Adams, was empowered to build what he may. Adams let the bucket sit and dry. If, by the end of his eight years in office, the bucket had not yet hardened, Jefferson, a man philosophically opposed to doing anything with the cement, next took possession. The office sat unexpanded for twelve years and the outlines of the office became

etched into the political landscape of the country. The power that had existed at the beginning of the country had been claimed. Every other office had seized its piece of the pie, and after twelve years little remained.

There have been many powerful vice presidents, and there will likely be more. The power they have seized for themselves has come from their own brilliance, fame or friendly relationship with their president. Little is transmitted to them by simply assuming office, and this is where Adams's personality played its part. His lack of success in expanding the office while the opportunity existed impacts the power of vice presidents today. I must respectfully disagree with Vice President Garner's assessment of the vice presidency. I do not see the office as a warm bucket of spit. I see it instead as a bucket of dried concrete.

Bibliography

PRIMARY

Manuscript Collections

Microfilms of The Adams Papers (1954). Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society.

Printed

(1834). Annals of Congress: The Debates and Proceedings in the Congress of the United States: Volume I. ed. Joseph Gales. Washington: Gales and Seaton.

Adams, John (1842). *Correspondence of Miss Adams: Volume II.* ed. Caroline Abigail Smith De Windt. New York: Wiley and Putnam.

Adams, John (1853). *The Works of John Adams.* ed. Charles Adams. Boston: Little, Brown and Company.

"An American Citizen" [Adams. John] (1805). *Discourses on Davila. A Series of Papers on Political History.* Boston: Russell and Cutler.

Jefferson, Thomas (2002). *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson Volume 30.* ed. Barbara B. Oberg. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Hamilton, Alexander (2003). "The Federalist No. 68." *The Federalist.* ed. Terence Ball. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Hamilton, Alexander (1962). *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton: Volume V.* ed. Harold C. Syrett. New York: Columbia University Press.

Hamilton, Alexander (1904). *The Works of Alexander Hamilton: Volume VIII.* ed. Henry Cabot Lodge. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons.

Maclay, William (1988). *The Diary of William Maclay and Other Notes on Senate Debates.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Maclay, William (1880). *Sketches of Debate in the First Senate of the United States, in 1789-90-91.* ed. George W. Harris. Harrisburg: Lane S. Hart.

Madison, James (1958). *The Federal Convention and the Formation of the Union of the American States.* ed. Winton U. Solberg. Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company.

Electronic

Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive. Massachusetts Historical Society. http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/

SECONDARY

Printed

Baumgartner, Jody (2006). *The American Vice Presidency Reconsidered.* Westport: Praeger Publishers.

Bowen, Catherine (1966). *Miracle at Philadelphia: The Story of the Constitutional Convention.* Boston: Little, Brown and Company.

Brown, Ralph (1975). *The Presidency of John Adams.* Wichita: The University Press of Kansas.

Cunningham, Noble (2000). *Jefferson vs. Hamilton: Confrontations that Shaped a Nation.* Boston: St. Martin's Press.

Ferling, John (2004). *Adams vs. Jefferson: The Tumultuous Election of 1800.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Grant, James (2005). *John Adams: Party of One.* New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Johnson, Paul (2007). *The Early American Republic, 1789-1829.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Light, Paul (1984). *Vice-Presidential Power: Advice and Influence in the White House.* Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Malone, Dumas (1948). *Jefferson and His Time: Volume 3.* Boston: Little, Brown and Company.

McCullough, David (2002). *John Adams.* New York: Simon & Schuster.

Morrison, Samuel (1927). *Oxford History of the United States 1783-1917.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Relyea, Harold, and Charles Arja (2002). *The Vice Presidency of the United States: Evolution of the Modern Office.* New York: Nova Science Publishers.

Russell, Francis (2002). *Adams: An American Dynasty.* New York: Simon & Schuster.

Smith, Page (1962). *John Adams: Volume II 1784-1826.* Garden City: Doubleday & Company, Inc.

Witcover, Jules (1992). *Crapshoot: Rolling the Dice on the Vice President.* New York: Crown Publishers, Inc.

Wood, Gordon (1969). *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787.* Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press.

Articles

Haraszti, Zoltan. "The 32nd Discourse on Davila." *The William and Mary Quarterly* 11, no. 1, (January, 1954): 89-92.

Smith, James. "Sedition in the Old Dominion: James T. Callender and the Prospect Before Us." *The Journal of Southern History* 20, no. 2, (May, 1954): 157-182.

Electronic

"Hannibal Hamlin, 15th Vice President (1861-1865)." *U.S. Senate: Art & History Home* http://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/common/generic/VP_Hannibal_Hamlin.htm (accessed September 15, 2007).

Lindner, Doug. "The Treason Trial of Aaron Burr." *Famous American Trials* http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/burr/burraccount.html (accessed September 15, 2007).