

# The Roots of John Adams's Political Science

Sarah Beth Vosburg Kitch

If ever an infant country deserved to be cherished it is America.  
—John Adams, “The Earl of Clarendon to William Pym,” No. II (1766)

The experiment is made and has completely succeeded; it can no longer be called into question whether authority in magistrates and obedience of citizens can be grounded on reason, morality, and the Christian religion.  
—John Adams, *A Defence of the Constitutions of the Governments of the United States of America* (1786)

Advert to the principles on which you commenced that glorious self-defense, which, if you behave with steadiness and consistency, may ultimately loosen the chains of all mankind.  
—John Adams, *Discourses on Davila* (1791)

In 1630, English lawyer John Winthrop (1588–1649) addressed the company bound for the new world aboard the *Arbella*. Their purpose, he explained, was to establish a society that would facilitate their highest ends. They consented to one another and covenanted with God to form a civil and ecclesiastical government to secure such a society. This society was the end toward which the government of the covenanted community must pilot and for which it must wisely navigate the perils of selfishness and injustice. Interestingly, nearly the whole of Winthrop’s speech is concerned with love and the requisites of a just society. It is in this context that Winthrop issues his closing admonition: “Now the only way to avoid this shipwreck, and to provide for our posterity, is to follow the counsel of Micah, to do justly, to love mercy, to walk humbly with our God. . . . For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us.”<sup>1</sup>

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1. John Winthrop, “A Modell of Christian Charitie,” in *The Sacred Rights of Conscience*, ed. Daniel L. Dreisbach and Mark David Hall (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, [1630] 2010) 123–31.

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One hundred thirty-three years later, John Adams (1735–1826), then twenty-eight years old, entered colonial political life. A key actor in American politics, John Adams was radically concerned with establishing a more just political order. That order would secure liberty by facilitating political virtue and fostering “amiable passions” while checking corrupted passions, especially avarice and ambition.<sup>2</sup> He would advance the themes of America as a remarkable political undertaking, conducted before God and all people. Yet he recast these central themes, often using the language of an experiment. For Adams, America was exceptional not because it was a new Israel but because it was by divine providence the site of an experiment to secure right order and so to advance liberty. As the home of an endeavor Adams and his peers hoped other nations would attempt, America was remarkable for her part in liberty’s progress. Although the language of experiment and mechanics (e.g., “checks and balances”) belongs to the Enlightenment milieu Adams knew well, the synthesis of classical and Christian sources on which he draws distinguishes his political theory. It was a similar synthesis of classical and Christian principles embodied in the American men that he thought distinguished their experiment.

The purpose of this article is to explore the roots of John Adams’s political science. For Adams, America holds a moderate and meaningful place in the world. Accordingly, I examine his understanding of the American political experiment, its origin, its aim, and its significance for “all mankind.”<sup>3</sup> Throughout, I focus on Adams’s understanding of America’s purpose and responsibility.

I first introduce the argument that John Adams’s political thought and action embody practical wisdom that is of more than historical interest to those concerned with American political life today.

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2. For Adams’s treatment of “amiable passions,” see John Adams, *The Revolutionary Writings of John Adams*, ed. C. Bradley Thompson (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2000), 152, and Section 1.

3. John Adams, *The Political Writings of John Adams*, ed. George A. Peek, Jr. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company [1954] 2003), 191. This study adds to the deserved increase of attention to John Adams as a pivotal theorist and actor in the formation of the American republic. See, for example, in addition to the works cited above, Russell Kirk, “Chapter III: John Adams and Liberty Under Law,” in *The Conservative Mind*, 7th ed. (Lake Bluff, IL: Regnery Books, 1986); “Chapter One: Founding and Social Order,” and “Chapter Two: John Adams: Genesis of One Man’s Common Sense,” in Jurgen Gebhardt, *Americanism: Revolutionary Order and Societal Self-Interpretation in the American Republic*, trans. Ruth Hein (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1993); C. Bradley Thompson, *John Adams and the Spirit of Liberty* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998)—cited hereafter as JASL; Richard Samuelson, “John Adams and the Republic of Laws,” in *History of American Political Thought* (New York: Lexington Books, 2003).

Next, I contend that America is distinctive for Adams because it is the site of an ongoing experiment in liberty. I examine Adams's evaluation of the American experience as a successful political experiment; his view of America's consequent responsibility to advance well-ordered liberty under heaven and before the watching world; and the limits that Adams's convictions regarding human nature, government, and power set for the ends and means of government. I conclude with a brief reflection on Adams's view of the quest for ordered liberty as a tenuous experiment, dependent for its continued though always imperfect success upon the practice of future generations.

## John Adams's Life and Thought

John Adams's life and political thought invite examination. Perhaps most thoroughly educated of all the founders in classical and English legal and political thought, Adams contributed vitally to the American Revolution and the design of the political order it birthed.<sup>4</sup> As C. Bradley Thompson emphasizes, "Adams played so many important roles at such critical points in the movement for independence and in the formation of the national polity that to misunderstand his thought and deeds is to misunderstand the Founding."<sup>5</sup> Of primary importance in the context of this inquiry is the fact that Adams offered his work not as a reaction to contemporary sentiment or an oracle of some independent force of progress, but as thought and service grounded in long experience and reflection on the nature of men, government, and power. He advanced on the conviction that men's choices and actions shape the lives of people and their polities.

The pivotal events of Adams's biography coincide with the major developments in revolutionary America. As an upstart young lawyer, Adams was a loyal opponent of the British crown; but, as he tells it, his allegiance to principles higher than the crown eventually rendered him a revolutionary and, later, a constitution maker.<sup>6</sup> A native of Braintree, Massachusetts, son of a Congregationalist deacon, and Harvard graduate, Adams began his political career by writing against the Stamp Act of 1765. In the course of his life, he would serve as a delegate to the First and Second Continental Congresses, diplomat to France and Holland, principal "engineer" of the Massachusetts Constitution of 1780, vice president of the United States

4. Thompson, *John Adams and the Spirit Liberty*, introduction.

5. *Ibid.*, xiv.

6. John Adams, *The Works of John Adams*, vol. 10 (Boston: Little, Brown and Co, 1856), 282; Adams, *The Revolutionary Writings of John Adams*, 166-67.

(with President George Washington), and president of the United States (with vice president Thomas Jefferson).<sup>7</sup>

Adams's political writings, personal letters, diary, and autobiography reveal a man who quested for personal order and purpose and ultimately influenced the order and aspirations of a nation. His personal and public endeavors were not disconnected. Notably, he considered his work an extension of the efforts of America's Puritan forebears to establish a just and free polity, even as he self-consciously participated in events that would affect decisive change in the political horizon of the late eighteenth century. Adams developed a complex synthesis of classical and Christian sources, strengthened by his confidence in the possibility of advancing liberty. In Gebhardt's judgment, his intellectual biography exemplifies the "moralistic republicanism of New England" that attended the "transformation of the Puritan into the Yankee and of the Reformation into the Enlightenment."<sup>8</sup> A man of considerable learning and common sense, Adams understood the American experience as a political experiment that was significant for "all mankind."<sup>9</sup> Herein I examine his understanding of the nature, aims, and means of that experiment.

## John Adams and the American Experiment in Liberty

For John Adams, America is remarkable because it is the site of an experiment to advance the legacy of ordered liberty. America is not the only possible site of liberty. Yet because it is the site of an experiment in liberty under law which Adams and his fellow founders hope others will take up, it is exceptional.

### *A Successful Experiment*

*The American Experience as Political Experiment* – In what sense is the American experience a political experiment and what sort of science does John Adams think necessary to secure its gains? He explains in his *Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States of America*: "The systems of legislators are experiments made on human life and manners, society and government."<sup>10</sup> At the open of

7. See editor's chronology and introduction to "A Dissertation on the Canon and Feudal Law," in *The Political Writings of John Adams*, ed. Peek.

8. Jurgen Gebhardt, *Americanism: Revolutionary Order and Societal Self-Interpretation in the American Republic*, trans. Ruth Hein (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1993), 67.

9. Adams, *The Political Writings of John Adams*, ed. Peek, 191.

10. *Ibid.*, 120. Adams authored the three-volume *Defence* in response to Turgot's derogation of the constitutions of the United States as neglected opportunities to centralize and consolidate governments—and just in time to influence the

the *Defence*, he describes the foundation of the United States as an experiment in establishing governments on popular sovereignty and on reason, morality, and religion.<sup>11</sup> Experiments in natural science belong in a lab. Political experiments, however, are neither so containable nor so expeditious: “Unhappily, political experiments cannot be made in a laboratory, nor determined in a few hours. The operation, once begun, runs over whole quarters of the globe and is not finished in many thousands of years.”<sup>12</sup>

Just over a decade after he signed the Declaration of Independence, Adams declares the experiment in American independence a success: “The experiment is made and has completely succeeded; it can no longer be called into question whether authority in magistrates and obedience in citizens can be grounded on reason, morality, and the Christian religion, without”—in contrast to England and Europe—“the monkery of priests or the knavery of politicians.”<sup>13</sup> He argues in one of his earliest political essays that, unconstrained, the desire for dominion “becomes an encroaching, grasping, restless, and ungovernable power.”<sup>14</sup> Liberties are safe only when power is limited. The achievement of the American governments is to at once legitimate and limit government by founding it not on claims to rule by divine right, but on reason, morality, and the Christian religion. The American experiment is thus an experiment in liberty. Adams judges the success of its governments “a great point gained in favor of the rights of mankind.”<sup>15</sup>

If the American political experience is remarkable and somehow significant for all mankind because it is an experiment in liberty, what is the nature of the liberty it promotes? Adams connects liberty to right order and the rule of law. Richard Samuelson explains his conviction. To start:

In its profound sense, law had to do with right and justice. Adams quoted one of his favorite authors, Cicero, who wrote that laws, “as they are founded on eternal morals, are emanations of the Divine mind” (*WJA* 6:56). The laws could be said to govern when a people submitted to the authority not of some imperfect human legislator but of the eternal Legislator of the universe.<sup>16</sup>

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convention that forged the U.S. Constitution of 1787. See Gebhardt, *Americanism*, 33, citing Adams, *The Works of John Adams*, vol. III, 23; Thompson, *John Adams and the Spirit of Liberty*, 41.

11. Adams, *The Political Writings of John Adams*, 118.

12. *Ibid.*, 120.

13. *Ibid.*, 118.

14. Adams, *The Revolutionary Writings of John Adams*, 22.

15. Adams, *The Political Writings of John Adams*, 118.

16. Richard Samuelson, “John Adams and the Republic of Laws,” in *History of American Political Thought*, ed. Bryan Paul Frost and Jeffrey Sikkenga (New York: Lexington Books, 2003), 115.

Moreover, Adams, in his own words, “define[s] liberty as the power to do as we would be done by. The definition of liberty to be the power of doing whatever the laws permit, meaning the civil laws, does not appear to be satisfactory.”<sup>17</sup> Liberty is more than the power to self-determination and requires more than passion for its support. It is not free reign to do whatever one wills, or even whatever the state allows. Rather, true liberty is informed and trained practice in self-government. Accordingly, in Samuelson’s summary: “Submission to the law of justice was the rule of law. In this sense, law was not the antithesis of freedom. Law was liberty.”<sup>18</sup>

Adams explains in the eighth Novanglus letter that liberty, virtue, and manly independence are inseparable: as the soul gives life and motion to the body, so virtue and independence animate liberty.<sup>19</sup> The love of liberty alone is not adequate to support either personal or political liberty.<sup>20</sup> Throughout his revolutionary and constitutional writings, Adams recognizes that the spirit of liberty requires the support of education. The maintenance of political liberty depends upon an education in theory and in practice, upon an education that fits and forms free and virtuous men.<sup>21</sup> To secure such liberty is the purpose of the American political experiment.

Significantly, the liberty Adams writes and lives to secure is God-given. He urges in the *A Dissertation Concerning the Canon and Feudal Law* that “liberty must at all hazards be supported. We have a right to it, derived from our Maker.”<sup>22</sup> The liberty of Americans, he adds, had been doubly secured with the pain, effort, and resources of the Puritan fathers.<sup>23</sup> He is convinced that although it is realized only in a minority, the love of liberty is fixed in human nature by the Creator. Hence his appeal to the “latent spark” that is the love of liberty along with other “amiable passions” of “resentment of injury and indignation against wrong; a love of truth and a veneration for virtue.”<sup>24</sup> In turn, the English liberties of life, liberty, and property recognized were “but certain rights of nature reserved to the citizen by the English constitution.”<sup>25</sup> In Adams’s account, then, liberty was given by God and reflected in the better part of human nature; America’s task was to maintain it as far as possible.

17. Adams, *The Works of John Adams*, vol. X, 377.

18. Samuelson, “John Adams,” 117.

19. Adams, *The Revolutionary Writings of John Adams*, 166.

20. See Thompson, *John Adams and the Spirit Liberty*, Introduction.

21. Adams, *The Revolutionary Writings of John Adams*, 32, 291–92, 297–322.

22. *Ibid.*, 28.

23. *Ibid.*

24. *Ibid.*, 152.

25. *Ibid.*, 240.

According to the *Defence*, the start of a political experiment is key.<sup>26</sup> So what does Adams make of the start of the American political experiment? To form an answer, one must look back, as he does, to the political order the Puritan forefathers established. Their purpose, Adams argues, was to secure not only religious liberty but also political liberty.

Their greatest concern seems to have been to establish a government of the church more consistent with the Scriptures, and a government of the state more agreeable to the dignity of human nature, than any they had seen in Europe, and to transmit such a government down to their posterity, with the means of securing it and preserving it forever.<sup>27</sup>

Their end was an enduring liberty. As he exhorts American colonists in 1765 to resist Parliament's extension of its powers of taxation and administration, Adams urges, "Let us recollect it was liberty, the hope of liberty for themselves and us and ours, which conquered all discouragements, dangers, and trials."<sup>28</sup> He writes to stir the same hope of liberty in his readers. In short, the experiment Adams pronounces a success in the *Defence* starts with the design for liberty drawn from Christian and classical sources he identifies in the *Dissertation*.

Importantly, he contends against the view that the Puritans sought solely to secure religious liberty on scriptural foundations. "It was not religion alone, as is commonly supposed; but it was a love of universal liberty, and a hatred, a dread, a horror, of the infernal confederacy [of canon and feudal law] before described, that projected, conducted, and accomplished, the settlement of America."<sup>29</sup> He emphasizes the Puritans' rich resources "in revelation and in reason too" as they designed government more consistent with both "the constitution of human nature and that religious liberty with which Jesus had made them free."<sup>30</sup> It is political order founded on this synthesis of sources that, in Adams's judgment, sets America apart.

Not long after, in 1767, Adams took up one of his most winning devices, fictional correspondence, to remind readers of the origins of the liberty they stood to lose. This liberty under law is inseparable from the virtues that at once supply it and flourish by its use. Writing as Governor John Winthrop of Massachusetts Bay to Governor William Bradford of Plymouth, he reflects, "it was the unwearied endeavor of our lives to establish a society on English, humane, and

26. Adams, *The Political Writings of John Adams*, 121, 144.

27. Adams, *The Revolutionary Writings of John Adams*, 25.

28. *Ibid.*, 33.

29. *Ibid.*, 23.

30. *Ibid.*, 24, 25-26.



Christian principles.”<sup>31</sup> Again it is the character of a people that endeavors to secure just government in accord with these principles that Adams finds finally distinctive. He iterates the point in a striking passage from another fictional correspondence:

If ever an infant country deserved to be cherished it is America. If ever any people merited honor and happiness they are her inhabitants. They are a people whom no character can flatter or transmit in any expressions equal to their merit and virtue; with the high sentiments of Romans, in the most prosperous and virtuous times of that commonwealth, they have tender feelings of humanity and the noble benevolence of Christians; they have the most habitual radical sense of liberty, and the highest reverence for virtue; they are descended from a race of heroes, who, placing their confidence in Providence alone, set the seas and skies, monsters and savages, tyrants and devils, at defiance for the sake of religion and virtue.<sup>32</sup>

America is to be cherished for the merit of her people, for their mutually supporting love and practice of virtue and liberty.

At the same time, Adams comments on the torpor that threatens to enervate the delicate spirit of liberty.<sup>33</sup> To some, his evaluations of human beings in general or of Americans in particular seem inconsistent. But his evaluations varied only as much as the people he studied.<sup>34</sup> If his judgments appear inconsistent, it is because he knew well that human beings embody the most perplexing, often marvelous and disturbing, inconsistencies. Thus the same body politic that drew Adams's admiration felt his strong censure by turns.

In Adams's account, America before the Revolution is extraordinary for the merit of her people as they heartily, if imperfectly, bolster “the noble foundations of their ancestors”—foundations of virtue and liberty.<sup>35</sup> Her people remain remarkable for their continued allegiance to the synthesis of classical and Christian principles that ground a just and free society. As he argues from his earliest political writings, resistance to Britain—and the eventual assertion of American independence—constitutes not a rejection of the political order the Puritan forefathers established but an attempt to uphold the principles it embodied. An older Adams would reflect that this very loyalty to right order and the principles of limited authority affected the Revolution in hearts and minds, which

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31. *Ibid.*, 59.

32. *Ibid.*, 50.

33. *Ibid.*, 59–60.

34. Thompson, *John Adams and the Spirit Liberty*, 20, 34, points out Adams's careful study of human nature. Adams's observations of human action and reflections on human motivation would serve him as he variously lauded, declaimed, provoked, and persuaded through many years as a statesman.

35. Adams, *The Revolutionary Writings of John Adams*, 60.



afterward compelled patriots to independence.<sup>36</sup> And it is this commitment that leads American statesmen beyond revolution principles, as he called them, to a political science for the maintenance of liberty under law.<sup>37</sup>

As Britain and the American colonies reached an impasse in spring of 1776, the Continental Congress exhorted the colonies to form constitutions. *Thoughts on Government* is Adams's response to numerous requests that he explicate the fundamentals of constitutional government. At its close, he thrills at the Americans' unique position in the history of political order, stating "This was a defining moment in world history and John Adams knew it."<sup>38</sup> He writes Mr. Wythe of Virginia,

You and I, my dear friend, have been sent into life at a time when the greatest lawgivers of antiquity would have wished to live. How few of the human race have ever enjoyed an opportunity of making an election of government, more than of air, soil, or climate, for themselves or their children! When, before the present epocha, had three millions of people full power and a fair opportunity to establish the wisest and happiest government that human wisdom can contrive?<sup>39</sup>

The outcome is not a matter of indifference. Adams knows the stakes. America is exceptional not for inherent qualities but because her people possess by divine providence a special opportunity—the prospect of securing liberty, against chance and human caprice. A survey of nations might lead one to despair “that human nature is incapable of liberty, that no honest equality can be preserved in society.”<sup>40</sup> Yet to Adams the constitutions of the United States, with their balances and checks of power, offer hope. A survey of these constitutions is cause enough “to fall upon our knees in gratitude to heaven for having been so graciously pleased to give us birth in that country [America] and for having destined us to live under her laws!” America is distinctive because America is an experiment in liberty. Yet Adams knows the experiment to be ongoing and sometimes precarious. Later, at an especially miry moment in the deliberations at the Constitutional Convention, Dr. Franklin summed the situation in his call for prayer:

I also believe that without [the Lord's] concurring aid we shall succeed in this political building little better than the Builders of Babel: We . . . ourselves shall become a reproach and a bye word down to future ages. And

36. Adams, *The Works of John Adams*, vol. X, 282.

37. Adams, *The Revolutionary Writings of John Adams*, 152.

38. Thompson, *John Adams and the Spirit Liberty*, 43.

39. Adams, *The Revolutionary Writings of John Adams*, 293.

40. Adams, *The Political Writings of John Adams*, 128.

what is worse, mankind may hereafter from this unfortunate instance, despair of establishing Governments by Human Wisdom and leave it to chance, war and conquest.<sup>41</sup>

The prevalent theme of America as a new Israel would have been familiar to Adams. In a letter of May 17, 1776, he tells his beloved Abigail of the awe he felt upon hearing a sermon paralleling Israel with America and Pharaoh with George III. He senses that his own role is significant, if not fully comprehensible:

Is it not a Saying of Moses, who am I, that I should go in and out before this great People? When I consider the great Events which are passed, and those greater which are rapidly advancing, and that I may have been instrumental in touching some Springs, and turning some great Wheels, which have had and will have such Effects, I feel an Awe upon my Mind, which is not easily described.<sup>42</sup>

Yet the image of America as a new Israel does not exhaust the sense of special purpose that permeates Adams's writings on America. On the whole, he does not speak of America as a chosen people. Rather, in Adams's treatment, America is distinctive for her purpose and responsibility: the prudential pursuit of liberty under law. In his thought, America has been and will be "exceptional" not for any inherent quality in her people but for their ability to perpetuate a well-ordered, free political community.

Throughout, Adams acknowledges America's position as a gift of Providence. Thus he writes in the *Defence*, "The people in America have now the best opportunity and the greatest trust in their hands that Providence ever committed to so small a number since the transgression of the first pair; if they betray their trust, their guilt will merit even greater punishment than other nations have suffered and the indignation of Heaven."<sup>43</sup> Like Winthrop's city on a hill and Franklin's political building, and in contrast to certain later conceptions of American exceptionalism, Adams's America would impact all mankind, for better or worse, by her example.

*John Adams's Political Science.* So much for the character of American political experiment. What of the science that is to guide the experiment? The primary concern in the present inquiry is to

41. Benjamin Franklin, "Call for Prayer in the Constitutional Convention," in *The Sacred Rights of Conscience*, ed. Daniel L. Dreisbach and Mark David Hall (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, [1787] 2010), 348-49.

42. John Adams, *Adams Family Correspondence*. vol. 1, ed. L. H. Butterfield, Wendell D. Garrett, and Marjorie Sprague (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1963), 410.

43. Adams, *The Political Writings of John Adams*, 115.

understand what John Adams thought distinctive about America—and specifically, the purpose and responsibilities that attend the opportunity to test whether just government could be established by human wisdom, against the alternative of rule by power or chance. His political science is eminently relevant here because he thought it was the means by which the possibility of free government could be tried. In sum, Adams viewed the revolution, war, and federal constitution as continuous with the colonial experiment in liberty; the new political science made him confident in the possibility of its sustained success.

A fundamental premise of Adams's political theory is that institutions influence the health of political communities. He perceives that the institutions of political power and the character of the men who exercise power will have reciprocal effects on one another. His political science therefore aims to design institutions that reflect a true assessment of human nature in order to cultivate what is noble and corral what is perverse in men. Accordingly, in his judgment, "as the divine science of politics is the science of social happiness, and the blessings of society depend entirely on the constitutions of government, which are generally institutions that last many generations, there can be no employment more agreeable to a benevolent mind than a research after the best."<sup>44</sup> This divine science of politics, as Gebhardt comments, is the practice of the knowledge of order.<sup>45</sup> It is a science that aims to secure social happiness by establishing institutions that facilitate political virtues. And it is a science grounded in experience. The Americans, writes Adams in the *Defence*, considered the design of constitutions, like architecture, both art and science. For lawgiving, like architecture, requires empirical observation of other great works, "whether they remain entire or in ruins," as well as the theoretical reflection that enables designers "to adopt the advantages and reject the inconveniences of all."<sup>46</sup> Its end is to enable generations of Americans to maintain a legacy of liberty.

In light of the progress of the arts and sciences in the modern age and the singular importance of securing human happiness, Adams finds the progress of political science surprisingly slow. "[I]s it not unaccountable," he asks, "that the knowledge of the principles and construction of free governments, in which the happiness of life, and even the further progress of improvement in education and society, in knowledge and virtue, are so deeply interested, should have remained at a full stand for two or three thousand years?"<sup>47</sup> Yet the

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44. *Ibid.*, 84.

45. Gebhardt, *Americanism: Revolutionary Order and Societal Self-Interpretation in the American Republic*, 35.

46. Adams, *The Political Writings of John Adams*, 118.

47. *Ibid.*, 108.

science of government has not been not entirely without improvement. Adams thinks premature Thucydides's acceptance of license and sedition as the perpetual condition of political life. He argues instead that a new political science, which draws on resources of experience and theoretical reflection, ancient and contemporary, offers a means to secure a tenable balance in government and advance liberty.<sup>48</sup> Specifically, Adams considers that (1) representative government, (2) the separation of judicial and legislative powers, and (3) "a balance in the legislature by three independent, equal branches are perhaps the only three discoveries in the constitution of free government since the institution of Lycurgus."<sup>49</sup> His political science intends to leverage these discoveries to the benefit of modern republics.

In Adams's judgment, the initial stage of the American political experiment—establishing a government on classical and Christian foundations for ordered liberty—had been successful. By its nature, however, the experiment concerns not only the present generation but also those to come. The question, then, is whether a system of checks and balances is sufficient to sustain the project successfully. Are political institutions sufficient guards of liberty under law?

The mechanical metaphor permeates Adams writings.<sup>50</sup> In his essay "Liberty, Metaphor, and Mechanism: 'Checks and Balances' and the Origins of Modern Constitutionalism," David Wootton explains that the founders' new science of politics employed the metaphor of a machine "to argue that constitutions are interacting systems in which, as Hume put it, 'Effects will always correspond to causes,' and that consequently what matters is not the moral quality of the rulers but the structure of the institutions within which the rulers operate."<sup>51</sup> Adams's own work, however, counters Wootton's conclusion that the application of the mechanical metaphor in the new political science implies that "consequently what matters is not the moral quality of the rulers but the structure within which the rulers operate."<sup>52</sup>

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48. *Ibid.*, 110.

49. *Ibid.*, 109.

50. In fact, Wootton points out that it was Adams who would coin the mechanical phrase "checks and balances" that still pervades American political thought. See David Wootton, "Liberty, Metaphor and Mechanism: 'Checks and Balances' and the Origins of Modern Constitutionalism," in *Liberty and the American Experience in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. David Womersley (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2006), 212, 249.

51. *Ibid.*, 210. In this connection, see also Alasdair MacIntyre's discussion on the transition from Aristotelian political science on the model of the biological science to the new political science on the model of Newtonian physics in *After Virtue*, Chapter 7, "'Fact,' Explanation and Expertise," and Peek's introduction in Adams, *The Political Writings of John Adams*, xxiii.

52. Wootton, "Liberty, Metaphor and Mechanism," 210.

It is intensely important to realize that Adams rejects the idea that institutions alone can secure liberty. Writing as Governor Winthrop, he rebuffs the notion “that a free government, especially the English, [is] a kind of machine, calculated for perpetual motion and duration; that no dangers attended it; and that it may easily preserve and defend itself, without the anxiety or attention of the people.”<sup>53</sup> Rather, he affirms, “The truth is precisely the reverse of this.”<sup>54</sup> Adams contends that institutions alone are inadequate for securing free government or liberty. Rather, the maintenance of liberty is difficult and demanding work requiring people attuned to the requisites of justice, as well as the perils that threaten it. In Gebhardt’s elucidation, “The concept of an experiment assigns the founding to the producing sector, but such symbols as ‘nature,’ ‘reason,’ ‘morality,’ and ‘Christian religion’ stress an actual context transcending the process of producing, which in turn becomes apparent in the production of order.”<sup>55</sup> In his 1765 *Dissertation on the Canon and Feudal Law*, Adams writes of the British constitution, “that truth, liberty, justice, and benevolence, are its everlasting basis; and if these could be removed, the superstructure is overthrown of course.”<sup>56</sup> The same is true for the new United States of America. And it is through the art and science of lawgiving aimed at justice that an order that transcends the political community is made manifest within the political community.

To Adams, the project to secure free government by human wisdom against chance, war, and conquest distinguished America and gave her citizens a special responsibility before God and men. The nature of that responsibility and the elements essential to its fulfillment—namely, a true map of man and a plan of constitutional architecture—form the subject of the next section. Critically, as I later show, it is because Adams sees liberty under law as the clear objective of the American experiment that he remains sensitive to the principles that guide and limit political authority.

### *Responsibility under Heaven and before the Watching World*

Essential to John Adams’s conception of American exceptionalism is a sense of obligation before heaven and before the world. This sense of double obligation pervades the “Instructions of the Town of Braintree to their Representative”, which Adams drafted in 1765:

We further recommend the most clear and explicit assertion and vindication of our rights and liberties to be entered on the public records, that

53. Adams, *The Revolutionary Writings of John Adams*, 62.

54. *Ibid.*, 62.

55. Gebhardt, *Americanism*, 35.

56. Adams, *The Revolutionary Writings of John Adams*, 33.

the world may know in the present and all future generations that we have a clear knowledge and a just sense of them, and, with submission to Divine Providence, that we never can be slaves.<sup>57</sup>

Adams had earlier developed the theme of slavery as sacrilege in the *Dissertation*. "God Almighty has promulgated from heaven, liberty, peace, and good-will to man!" To suffer men to abrogate liberty was "as offensive in the sight of God as it is derogatory from our own honor or interest or happiness."<sup>58</sup> Later, when the Americans achieve independence, the same theme permeates Adams's constitutional recommendations.<sup>59</sup> America is significant for the example it would set as the test of the new political science, which appeared to Adams to be the only means of escape from the political cycle that ends in tyranny. To succeed would be to secure the order Lincoln later called "the last best, hope of earth."<sup>60</sup> To fail, in his vision, would be to cast doubt forever on the possibility of designing governments that aspired to justice rather than the rule of the strongest. As Samuelson explains:

By beginning well, America could demonstrate how to create legitimate governments based upon the consent of the governed and that such governments could work in practice. Throughout history, every republic had failed. . . . By making a new experiment in republican self-government, Adams and his peers took a great responsibility upon themselves. If the American republic collapsed or grew tyrannical, it would only strengthen the conventional wisdom [against the possibility of self-government], rendering it that much harder to defend the old causes of liberty and self-government in the future.<sup>61</sup>

America is remarkable for her great responsibility. Her role in liberty's progress is special, but not exclusive. Quite the contrary: Adams hopes the example of her success will contribute to the expansion of ordered liberty. To fulfill their task, Americans need a "true map of man" and the practical wisdom to frame government accordingly.

*A True Map of Man.* John Adams's understanding of human nature is key to his view of and for the American political experiment. Ellis

57. Adams, *The Revolutionary Writings of John Adams*, 41.

58. *Ibid.*, 33.

59. Adams, *The Political Writings of John Adams*, 115.

60. Lincoln, "Annual Message to Congress, 1862," in the *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Digital Library Production Services), <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/1/lincoln/lincoln5/1:1126?rgn=div1;singlegenre=All;sort=occur;subview=detail;type=simple;view=fulltext;q1=last+best#>.

61. Samuelson, "John Adams and the Republic of Laws," 119.

Sandoz emphasizes Adams's insistence on a "true map of man"<sup>62</sup> as "the great secret" that "uniquely lies at the heart of the Constitution of the United States and its elaborate institutional arrangements."<sup>63</sup> Sandoz highlights Adams's assessment: "All philosophers ancient and modern had missed the mark and for one basic reason, he thought: 'Not one of them takes human nature as it is for his foundation.'"<sup>64</sup> A keen student of human desires and action, Adams considers an understanding of liberty's source and purpose essential to any apology for its cultivation. He shows that the case for liberty must start with a true map of man—that is, a close account of the dignity and frailty of human beings.<sup>65</sup>

To be sure, Adams agrees with Socrates and Plato, Cicero and Seneca, Hutcheson and Butler that reason is the highest of human capacities.<sup>66</sup> Indeed, the human capacity for reason grounds the principle of consent that is the foundation of representative government.<sup>67</sup> To sum his own position, he quotes John Locke, who quotes Richard Hooker: "Laws therefore they are not which *publick Approbation* hath not made so, for Laws human of what kind soever are available by Consent."<sup>68</sup> Adams also elaborates the corresponding right to alter or abolish governments that abuse or deny consent: "[F]or metaphysicians and politicians may dispute forever, but they will never find any other moral principle or foundation of rule and obedience, than the consent of governors and governed."<sup>69</sup>

Yet, although reason is essential, the evidence of experience shows that "passions and appetites are parts of human nature as well as reason and the moral sense."<sup>70</sup> The problem is not human desires simply, which are the essential impetus of human society and endeavors, but inordinate desires, which lead men to violate the liberties of others. At least twice Adams quotes Jeremiah 17:9, urging men to "look into their own hearts, which they will find to be deceitful

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62. Adams, *The Revolutionary Writings of John Adams*, 33.

63. Ellis Sandoz, *Republicanism, Religion, and the Soul of America* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2006), 49.

64. *Ibid.*, 49.

65. Adams, *The Revolutionary Writings of John Adams*, 33.

66. Adams, *The Political Writings of John Adams*, 159.

67. Compare Adams's constitutional theory and practice in the Massachusetts Constitution, esp. sec. X, in Adams, *The Revolutionary Writings of John Adams*, 297–322; Adams, *The Political Writings of John Adams*, 128–29.

68. Adams, *The Revolutionary Writings of John Adams*, 144–45. See Richard Hooker, *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, ed. Arthur Stephen McGrade (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), I.10.8, 92–93.

69. Adams, *The Revolutionary Writings of John Adams*, 227–28.

70. Adams, *The Political Writings of John Adams*, 159.



above all things and desperately wicked.”<sup>71</sup> Self-deceit blinds all men, even the wisest and most capable, and is a source of immense suffering.<sup>72</sup> Although men's consciences are commissioned by God to rule them, “swarms of passions, avarice and ambition, servility and adulation, hopes, fears, jealousies, envy, revenge, malice, and cruelty are continually buzzing in the world.”<sup>73</sup> In addition, Adams “considers men as free, moral, and accountable agents; and he takes men as God has made them”—that is, he clarifies, as equal before God and the law, but unequal in abilities and opportunities.<sup>74</sup> The combination of inordinate passions and natural inequality guarantee that, although it “is the duty of all men to deny themselves and obey the laws of nature and the laws of God,” men do not comply on their own initiative.<sup>75</sup> Insatiable passions, especially the cocktail of ambition, avarice, indolence, and self-deceit, lead men to turn their capacities to private gain to the detriment of the common good. Consequently, writes Adams, “It is our duty to enter into associations and compel one another to do some of it [i.e., the common good].”<sup>76</sup> Adams contends that men need government to turn one another from their absorption with personal and local gains toward the common good instead. Of course, positions of power in turn magnify the temptations that make government necessary in the first place.<sup>77</sup> Adams's first recommendation to regulate the power of passion in politics is reflection and vigilance in public life: “The steady management of a good government is the most anxious, arduous and hazardous vocation on this side of the grave.”<sup>78</sup> Beyond this, however, Adams offers an institutional design that “will teach [great men] the great political virtues of humility, patience, and moderation, without which every man in power becomes a ravenous beast of prey.”<sup>79</sup> That is, he recommends institutions he thinks adequate to fostering the best of human passions and turning private pursuits to the common good.

*Constitutional Architecture* – Although John Adams is firm on revolution principles, he is even more concerned with the subsequent foundation of free government. He designs a constitutional plan intended to account for both the dignity and corruptibility of men.

71. Adams, *The Revolutionary Writings of John Adams*, 17; see also, Adams, *The Political Writings of John Adams*, 152.

72. Adams, *The Revolutionary Writings of John Adams*, 9.

73. *Ibid.*, 9.

74. Adams, *The Political Writings of John Adams*, 201, 198–201.

75. *Ibid.*, 155.

76. *Ibid.*

77. Adams, *The Revolutionary Writings of John Adams*, 9–10, 289–91, 150–51.

78. *Ibid.*, 11.

79. *Ibid.*, 291.

For, “[i]n the institution of government it must be remembered that, although reason ought always to govern individuals, it certainly never did since the Fall, and never will till the Millennium; and human nature must be taken as it is, as it has been, and as it will be.”<sup>80</sup> Ten years after he determined to leave questions of regime design to the founders of empires, Adams takes up the task in his 1776 *Thoughts on Government*.<sup>81</sup> There he maintains, as he did in 1766, that the best form of government can only be considered when the end of government is settled.<sup>82</sup> “For government is a frame, a scheme, a system, a combination of powers for a certain end, namely, —the good of the whole community.”<sup>83</sup> All who consider the question agree that the end of government is the happiness of society. Adams quickly clarifies the nature of this happiness: sages of all stripes agree that the “happiness of man, as well as his dignity, consists in virtue.”<sup>84</sup> The end determined, the next question is what foundational principle or passion will best achieve *salus populi*.<sup>85</sup> Most governments are founded on fear—Thomas Hobbes, for example, founds the Leviathan on fear of sudden, violent death; some governments operate on honor, which is, however, inferior to the virtue it mimics and supports. Against a foundation on base passions, Adams contends for a government established on the “noblest passions and most generous affections in our nature.”<sup>86</sup> He contends that republican government, in which rule of law limits the sovereign power, is the best form of government because it preserves citizens’ liberty as the rule of law limits perverse uses of power that would impede on their lives, liberties, or property. Beyond this, the best and most secure of republican governments are those whose laws form balances between the orders in society and checks on the passions that motivate human action.<sup>87</sup> The balance of powers in society is the best guardian of the laws that protect liberty.<sup>88</sup> Together, republican government and the institutions of checks and balances achieve the “effectual control of rivalries,” which Adams considers the “essence of free government.”<sup>89</sup>

80. Adams, *The Political Writings of John Adams*, 159.

81. Adams, *The Revolutionary Writings of John Adams*, 53 and 287.

82. *Ibid.*, 51–53, 287–88.

83. *Ibid.*, 53.

84. *Ibid.*, 288.

85. *Ibid.*

86. *Ibid.*

87. *Ibid.*, 86.

88. Adams, *The Political Writings of John Adams*, 168.

89. *Ibid.*, 193.

So checks and balances formalize and separate the various, potentially conflicting, interests in society. Separation alone, however, is inadequate because it simply sets the field for a conflict between executive and legislative to be won by the strongest power. To secure free government, the constitution must also establish a system of checks on power. Because it is designed to turn the very passions that drive men to attempt tyrannical rule to prevent such usurpations instead, Adams views a system of checks and balances as the surest security for a republic, "an empire of laws, and not of men."<sup>90</sup> To institute such a system is, to his mind, the fulfillment of the great art of lawgiving.<sup>91</sup> As Sandoz observes, "The true *political* anthropology, divine science of politics, and the principles of government Adams had in view and helped to formulate were later refined for our compound constitutional republic and collected in a book written for forensic purposes and entitled *The Federalist Papers*."<sup>92</sup>

Furthermore, Adams's true map of man and science of politics focus his attention on the fact that even the best institutional design—namely, that which accounts for men as they are and directs them toward the common good—requires good men. The Massachusetts Constitution of 1780, of which Adams was the principal engineer, provides for "The Encouragement of Literature, &c." with this justification:

Wisdom and knowledge, as well as virtue, diffused generally among the body of the people, being necessary for the preservation of their rights and liberties, and as these depend on the spreading of the opportunities and advantages of education in the various parts of the country and among the different orders of the people, it shall be the duty of legislators and magistrates in all future periods of this commonwealth to cherish the interests of literature and sciences and all seminaries of them; . . . to countenance and inculcate the principles of humanity and general benevolence, public and private charity, industry and frugality, honesty and punctuality in their dealings, sincerity, good humor, and all social affections and generous sentiments among the people.<sup>93</sup>

In "Thoughts on Government," Adams similarly urges, "Laws of the liberal education of youth, especially of the lower class of people, are so extremely wise and useful that to a humane and generous mind no expense for the purpose would be thought extravagant."<sup>94</sup> The federal constitution, shaped by Adams's constitutional theory, would also depend on state constitutions, local politics, and the

90. *Ibid.*, 86.

91. *Ibid.*, 193.

92. Sandoz, *Republicanism, Religion, and the Soul of America*, 50.

93. Adams, *The Revolutionary Writings of John Adams*, 321.

94. *Ibid.*, 288, 292.

extra-political institutions such as religion, family, and education that form persons as men and citizens. Notably, Adams's designs for government do not call simply for elections and appointments but seek to "depute power from the many to a few of the most wise and good" and take into account whether or not a society has "a sufficient number of suitable characters" for the proposed frequency of elections.<sup>95</sup> Adams practice and theory of politics make clear his conviction that institutions alone cannot maintain liberty under law. He shows, to the contrary, the importance of politics based on persuasion and shared pursuit of the common good, fostered by education and extra-political institutions, which is in turn supported by a constitutional framework that takes men as they are.

### *The Limits of Politics*

A fundamental humility marks John Adams's confidence in the American experiment in liberty. His political science strives to understand men and government for the purpose of better securing the happiness that attends right order, or virtue. It seeks neither perfect knowledge nor the perfection of men, whether by means of the knowledge gained or any other means. Rather the philosophical anthropology that grounds Adams's political science and the just order at which it aims guide and limit his recommendations for the American experiment in liberty. Richard Samuelson emphasizes the importance of Adams's ethical monotheism in moderating his political science:

By accepting on faith that there was one God who created and ordered the world, and by admitting that he was doing so, Adams brought a certain humility to his thought . . . Ultimately, Adams's belief that men were free and had reason were inextricably linked to ethical monotheism . . . The order men perceive in the universe allowed men to function and to enjoy liberty so long as men did not claim to know too much about that order.<sup>96</sup>

Adams recognizes that a regime founded on imperfect knowledge of men and government must remain open to alteration. He praises the proposed U.S. Constitution as an effort that is, "if not the greatest exertion of human understanding, the greatest single effort of national deliberation that the world has ever seen."<sup>97</sup> At the same time, he expects that experience will reveal "its inconveniences and

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95. *Ibid.*, 291.

96. Samuelson, "John Adams and the Republic of Laws," 116; see also, Adams, *The Political Writings of John Adams*, 201.

97. Adams, *The Political Writings of John Adams*, 163.

imperfections” and affirms the people’s capacity to make good use of the proposed Constitution’s provisions for amendment.<sup>98</sup>

Critically, Adams urges an American political experiment that aims at improvement, against the pursuit of human perfectibility through an unlimited civil order. Improvement, understood as the spread of civil and religious liberty and the social happiness that attends personal and public virtues, is a worthy and achievable goal. Ultimately, he thinks the vicissitudes that marked young America’s course will contribute to the

advancement of civil and religious liberty, and amelioration in the condition of mankind. For I am a believer in the probable improvability and improvement, the ameliorability and amelioration in human affairs; though I never could understand the doctrine of the perfectibility of the human mind.<sup>99</sup>

He is confident that a science of politics can balance and check the passions of individuals and orders in society.

Yet Adams never loses sight of the fact that the limits of institutional design coincide with the limits of human perfectibility. He admonishes in his 1789 *Discourses on Davila*, “Amidst all their exultations Americans and Frenchmen should remember that the perfectibility of man is only human and terrestrial perfectibility.”<sup>100</sup> There is no escape from the human condition. He states, “Cold will still freeze, and fire will never cease to burn; disease and vice will continue to disorder, and death to terrify mankind.” To what extent, then, is progress possible? In his judgment, human designs cannot improve human nature, but they can better understand and account for it: “Emulation next to self-preservation will forever be the great spring of human actions, and the balance of a well-ordered government alone will be able to prevent that emulation from degenerating into dangerous ambition, irregular rivalries, destructive factions, wasting seditions, and bloody, civil wars.”<sup>101</sup> As Samuelson sums it, “A well-formed government worked with human nature and not against it, accepting man as he was in order to move men in the direction of what they ought to be.”<sup>102</sup> Fundamentally, Adams works from the thesis that political science can change the ways in which human action within political society is structured through institutions but cannot change human nature.

But even a well-formed government will be futile should dehumanizing doctrines prevail. Most gravely, Adams fears that the denial of

98. *Ibid.*, 162–63.

99. Adams, *The Works of John Adams*, vol. X, 100–101.

100. Adams, *The Political Writings of John Adams*, 192.

101. *Ibid.*

102. Samuelson, “John Adams and the Republic of Laws,” 124.

the Creator will lead to the denial of human dignity: “Is there a possibility that the government of nations may fall into the hands of men who teach the most disconsolate of all creeds, that men are but fireflies and that this *all* is without a father? Is this the way to make man, as man, an object of respect?”<sup>103</sup> Should such men and doctrines prevail, Adams warns, they would “make murder itself . . . as innocent as the swallowing of mites on a morsel of cheese.”<sup>104</sup> The nightmare Adams shies even to mention would become the reality of subsequent centuries.

Notably, the theory of liberty that informs Adams’s understanding of America’s purpose and responsibility gives limits to government that sharply contrast, for example, with the view Hobbes puts forth in the *Leviathan*. First, in direct opposition to Hobbes, Adams rejects fear as an adequate foundation of American government: an appeal to “so sordid and brutal a passion” makes men “stupid and miserable.”<sup>105</sup> Second, whereas for Hobbes the end of government is the preservation of life (which then legitimates reasons of state and state power without limit), for Adams the end of government is the well-being of the people—understood, certainly, to include the preservation of life, but also to include the happiness proper to political society and the recognition that human perfection exists beyond political society. Finally, Adams’s concept of human dignity based on liberty given by God is a firmer foundation for the concept of consent—chiefly because, in contradistinction to Hobbes’s *Leviathan*, it gives grounds for resistance to the claims of totalizing political power.

In brief, Adams champions improvement but warns against dreams of mundane perfection. Unfailingly confident in truth’s ultimate victory, he remains temperate and urges diligence and hope. He writes to John Taylor, “And if I admit, as I do, that truth generally prevails and virtue is or will be triumphant in the end, you must allow that honesty has a hard struggle and must prevail by many a well-fought and fortunate battle, and, after all, must often look to another world for justice, if not pardon.”<sup>106</sup> Success in the American political experiment means not the perfection of men or regimes but hard-won progress in securing a more just order by moderating passions and protecting the fragile liberty granted to men as beings created in the image of God.

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103. Adams, *The Political Writings of John Adams*, 193–94.

104. *Ibid.*, 194.

105. *Ibid.*, 85.

106. *Ibid.*, 208.

## Conclusion: America and the Quest for Order—To Be Continued

John Adams was a political thinker and actor whose quest for personal and public order made him acutely aware of the significance of the American political experiment. In Adams's political thought, America is distinctive as the home of an experiment in liberty under law. He argued that the test to prove the possibility of founding government to secure justice against chance and force had begun in America with the Puritan founding on classical and Christian sources. In turn, he contended, Americans' allegiance to the justice that order aimed to approximate ultimately issued in the revolution and war against Britain. As a key political actor in the nascent republic, Adams drew on a new political science informed by a synthesis of the classical and Christian sources the Puritan fathers shared. He thought the Americans were responsible under heaven and before the whole world to continue the experiment. Their success or failure would be critical to liberty's progress. He therefore admonished his countrymen in 1791, "Advert to the principles on which you commenced that glorious self-defense, which, if you behave with steadiness and consistency, may ultimately loosen the chains of all mankind."<sup>107</sup>

Adams saw America as the site of an experiment to see whether men could foster justice and ordered liberty against force, caprice, and chance. He decried power founded in dogma—including claims to authority founded on divine right and the parallel dogmas of determinism, ineluctable progress, and inevitable decline.<sup>108</sup> He thought that, whether they prophesied inevitable democratization or inevitable doom, such dogmas blinded men to the "hard work of liberty."<sup>109</sup> The success of the experiment could be realized only if members of subsequent generations continued the quest for a more just order. He states "It would require that a certain number of them treat the Founders as peers in a conversation about constitutions and politics, not as demi-gods whose work ought never to be questioned or changed."<sup>110</sup>

To close, then, one might ask in the language of Adams's metaphor, how runs the experiment? Is it still adjusted with a sense of America's responsibility to foster liberty under law before God and all people? The evidence is ambivalent at best. Moreover, contemporary discourse betrays a shrunken understanding of liberty connected to the loss of a shared notion of the nature and purpose of liberty, and with it, of civic

107. *Ibid.*, 116–17, 191; and Gebhardt, *Americanism*, 49.

108. See Samuelson, "John Adams and the Republic of Laws," 127.

109. The phrase is Samuelson's, 128.

110. Samuelson, "John Adams and the Republic of Laws," 128.



friendship. Nevertheless, current events bear witness to renewed conscientiousness among citizens and even, among some, a serious consideration of the relationship between character, culture, and constitution. To re-enter the conversation with America's founders means, as a start, to consider (1) the purpose of political life (i.e., Is it the pursuit of the common good? If so, what is the common good? What do we now pursue?), (2) the conditions for its attainment (i.e., What is civic friendship? What are its prerequisites and supports?), and (3) the strongest motivators of human action (i.e., If reason is essential, but passions drive politics, how can the political order foster amiable passions and check the consequences of corrupt passions in political life?). In the final analysis, the "hard work of liberty" still requires that men think not only about but also with Adams and the founders with whom he thought, argued, and acted to continue the American experiment in liberty under law.

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