

Chapter Title: The American Revolution

Book Title: Adams and Jefferson

Book Subtitle: A Revolutionary Dialogue

Book Author(s): MERRILL D. PETERSON

Published by: University of Georgia Press. (1976)

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv21d62fn.6>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



This book is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0). To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>. Funding is provided by National Endowment for the Humanities, Humanities Open Book Program grant.



JSTOR

University of Georgia Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Adams and Jefferson*



The American Revolution

JOHN ADAMS AND THOMAS JEFFERSON FIRST MET IN JUNE 1775 at the Second Continental Congress in Philadelphia. The Battle of Bunker Hill had just been fought in Adams' Boston. Amidst martial pomp and fanfare Congress dispatched General George Washington to take command of the continental forces rallying near there. Catching the sense of Congress, Jefferson wrote to friends in Virginia that "the war is now heartily entered into, without a prospect of accommodation but thro' the effectual interposition of arms."¹ The war had begun. Incipient revolutionary governments were in being in both Massachusetts and Virginia. But whether American independence would be declared or won, whether the continent would be united, and what the ultimate course of this revolution would be no one could tell. Adams and Jefferson, finding that they thought alike on the great questions before Congress, quickly became friends and coadjutors.

The friendship between them continued, though not without interruption, for half a century, throughout "the age of revolutions and constitutions," as Adams would name it, which he and Jefferson and their compatriots inaugurated in America.² The story of their friendship has an appealing human interest, of course, and the later correspondence between them, when they were both retired from the public stage, stands as a literary monument of the age. More important than the story or the correspondence, however, was the dialogue of ideas through which these two philosopher-statesmen carried forward the ongoing search for the meaning and purpose of the American Revolution. The Revolution did not end in 1776

or 1783; it was given a new turn by the French Revolution, and the Jeffersonian “Revolution of 1800” settled its destiny in the American polity. Adams and Jefferson were participants, indeed the chief ideological standard-bearers—at first as political allies, later as political foes—in this entire sweep of democratic revolution. The revolution that had been the basis of the friendship gradually tore it apart, leaving it in tatters in 1800. Yet the friendship was restored in 1812, as partisan and ideological passions receded, mainly through the friendly mediation of Dr. Benjamin Rush. Rush, himself a signer of the Declaration of Independence, seemed to think the reconciliation of these American patriarchs a national responsibility. “I consider you and [Mr. Jefferson] as the North and South Poles of the American Revolution,” he told Adams. “Some talked, some wrote, and some fought to promote and establish it, but you and Mr. Jefferson *thought* for us all.”³

Adams and Jefferson died within hours of each other on the fiftieth anniversary of American independence, July 4, 1826. The full significance of what they had thought, of what they had contributed to the founding of the nation, and, above all, of their reconciliation was thus dramatically enforced on the public mind. Eulogizing the deceased patriots in Boston’s Faneuil Hall, Daniel Webster declared, “No two men now live, fellow-citizens, perhaps it may be doubted whether any two men have ever lived, in one age, who, more than those we commemorate, have impressed their own sentiments, in regard to politics and government, on mankind, infused their own opinions more deeply into the opinions of others, or given a more lasting direction to the current of human thought.”⁴ With the passing of Adams and Jefferson, the curtain fell on the nation’s revolutionary age. But, as Webster said, their work and their wisdom had not perished with them. The revolutionary dialogue of fifty years between Adams and Jefferson was an enduring legacy to American liberty.



Whatever the later differences between Adams and Jefferson, neither ever doubted “the perfect coincidence” of their principles and politics in 1775–76.⁵ Both had risen to positions of revolutionary leadership in their respective provinces. Adams was the veteran of the two. Jefferson was still a young law student in Virginia when Adams, in 1765, made his political debut with the celebrated Instructions of the Town of Brintree, declaring Parliament’s Stamp Act unconstitutional. Born in 1735, eight years before Jefferson, he had been longer engaged in the colonial resistance to Great Britain, had served conspicuously in the First Continental Congress, and was widely recognized, along with his cousin Samuel Adams and Patrick Henry and Richard Henry Lee of Virginia, as one of the foremost leaders of the American cause. Thus in the early relationship of the two men Adams was clearly the senior partner. Jefferson deferred to him and would continue to do so for many years. The Virginian’s reputation had gone before him to Congress. Since his entrance into the House of Burgesses in 1769, a twenty-six-year-old delegate from western Albemarle County, Jefferson had sided with the party of Henry and Lee and made something of a name for himself as a draftsman of legislative papers championing American rights. His writings were known and admired, Adams later said, for “their peculiar felicity of expression.” After a few weeks acquaintance, he noted with approval the judgment of a fellow delegate that Jefferson was “the greatest rubber off of dust” to be met with in Congress—a man of learning and science as well as a forthright politician.⁶ In debate on the floor of the House, where Adams excelled, Jefferson seldom uttered a word. The legend grew up, even before they were in their graves, that Jefferson had been “the pen” and Adams “the tongue” (Washington, of course, “the sword”) of American independence. “Though a silent member of Congress,” Adams recalled, “[Jefferson] was so prompt, frank, explicit, and decisive upon committees and in conversation, not even Samuel Adams was more

so, that he soon seized upon my heart.”⁷ They saw a good deal of each other on committees, and Adams said that Jefferson agreed with him in everything. It is not surprising, then, that he came to regard Jefferson in the light of a political protégé, and such was the Virginian’s cordiality and esteem that he returned the favor with every appearance of discipleship.

The course of experience that brought these two men to Philadelphia in 1775 was in some respects similar. Both were first sons in the succession of several generations of hardy independent farmers—Adams at Braintree in the shadow of Boston, Jefferson in the Virginia up-country where his father had been among the earliest settlers. However far they strayed, they always returned to their birthplace as the best place of all, finally dying there, and for all the honors heaped upon them, claimed to cherish the title of “farmer” above any other. Both attended the provincial college—Harvard in Massachusetts, William and Mary in Virginia—and then prepared for the bar. Beginning with the *Institutes* of Lord Coke, the Whig champion against the Stuart kings, they mastered the entire history of English law, which provided the foundation of their political opinions. Both men made their provincial reputations at the bar; they were practicing lawyers before they were politicians, but as the Revolution came on they were forced to abandon their profession and neither ever really returned to it.

Adams and Jefferson were preeminently students, not only of law but of history and philosophy and literature, both ancient and modern. They were avid readers—and readers with a purpose. Fragmentary notes on what they read appear in their surviving “commonplace books.” While their personal tastes varied, many of the same names—Cicero, Sidney, Locke, Bolingbroke, Montesquieu, Hutcheson, Hume—turn up in the early reports of their reading. If Jefferson was more consciously a student of the Enlightenment, exalting nature and reason against mystery and authority, Adams also felt its liberating influence. A youthful ambition of both men was to

build a large personal library. And they succeeded, after considerable effort and financial sacrifice. Jefferson's library numbered over six thousand volumes when it was sold to Congress in 1815, becoming the nucleus of the Library of Congress; and Adams' collection, while only half as large at the time of his death (it was left to the Boston Public Library) was perhaps not much behind Jefferson's when at its fullest.⁸ Being studious men in love with their books, their families, and their firesides, both were rather reluctant politicians. For several years after the Stamp Act controversy, Adams wavered between Boston and Braintree, repeatedly forswore the noisy political world of Sam Adams for the quiet, along with the fortune, of his profession, and only finally surrendered himself to the revolutionary movement in 1773. Jefferson, although he grew up in a society where government was the responsibility of the class to which he belonged, experienced the same ambivalence and, unlike Adams, never overcame it.

These similarities of background and interest were undoubtedly important in laying the basis of friendship; more important in the longer run of history, however, were differences of temperament, of intellectual style and outlook, of social and political experience, which were less apparent in 1775 than they would be fifteen or twenty years later. Adams was a latter-day son of New England Puritanism. Although he shook off the theological inheritance from the fathers, he cherished the Puritan past and rather than replace the original model of a Christian commonwealth—John Winthrop's "city upon a hill"—he sought to transform it into a model of virtuous republicanism. The Puritans had come to Massachusetts Bay to worship as *they* pleased, and however noble their ideal it was not an ideal of religious or political freedom. Yet in his first published essay, *A Dissertation on the Canon and Feudal Law*, 1765, Adams reconstructed the Puritan past into a legend of republican beginnings, thereby conscripting it in the cause of revolution. "It was not religion alone, as is commonly sup-

posed, but it was a love of universal liberty . . . ,” he wrote, “that projected, conducted, and accomplished the settlement of America.”⁹ The fundamental institutions established by the Puritans—congregations, schools, militia, and town meetings—must remain the pillars of the community, and no government, republican or whatever, could survive unless it was ordered on “the perfect plan of divine and moral government.”¹⁰ The duties of religion being the only sure foundation of public virtue and happiness were an obligation of the state. The strain of Calvinism, which thus entered into Adams’ republican vision, colored his theory of human nature. “Sin,” although wrenched from its old theological associations, remained a prominent word in his political vocabulary, roughly translated as human weakness and selfishness. Reading Montesquieu through Calvinist lenses, Adams deemed austerity of morals and manners indispensable to republican government. “But,” he said in 1776, “there is so much rascality, so much venality and corruption, so much avarice and ambition . . . among all ranks and degrees of men even in America, that I sometimes doubt whether there is public virtue enough to support a republic.”¹¹ He was a doubting republican at the starting gate, one for whom the American Revolution carried the heavy burden, added to everything else, of moral regeneration after the old Puritan vision.

Now to all this Jefferson, virtually untouched by the Puritan dispensation, presents a sharp contrast. Virginia had no legend of pure and noble beginnings, nothing peculiarly edifying in its past, no glorious heritage to preserve. And to be a revolutionary there was to be an enemy, if not of religion, then of the established Anglican Church which dominated the landscape. Unlike Adams, for whom the New England church was an ally, Jefferson came to the Revolution as a man alienated from the traditional religious culture of his community. Taking his moral and political directives from the modern philosophy of the Enlightenment, Jefferson felt no need to maintain

the centrality of religion in human affairs. Indeed it was one of the missions of the Enlightenment to retire God to the wings and place man at the center of the stage. Destiny was no longer controlled by Providence but by Nature. Man was inherently good, seeking his own happiness through the happiness of others, and with the progress of knowledge Nature would answer all his purposes. Civil education was required, but not churchly discipline. Religious restraints, even the hope of Heaven and the fear of hell, were unnecessary; in so far as they were supported by civil government they were unjust. Just as morality had no certain dependence on religion, religion was of no concern to the state. As Jefferson would write in the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom, "our civil rights have no dependence on our religious opinions, more than our opinions in physics or geometry."¹² With this view Adams could not agree. For him the American Revolution was a continuation under new auspices of an old quest for a pure and righteous commonwealth, while for Jefferson it looked to the liberation of the individual from all conceptions of higher moral authority embodied in church or state.

The friendship between Adams and Jefferson was a triumph of will over seeming incompatibilities of personal temperament and intellectual style. Neither man, one short and stout, the other tall and lean, could have seen himself reflected in the other. Adams was warm and contentious, Jefferson cool and agreeable. Adams was impulsive and careless, Jefferson deliberate and precise. Adams was a gyroscope of shifting moods; his nerves, as Mercy Warren once told him, were "not always wound up by the same key."¹³ Jefferson's nerves, together with the compass of his mind, were amazingly steady. Adams always wore his heart on his sleeve and perceived the world about him as a drama in which he was the central character. Jefferson, while not an insensitive man, approached the world through his reason and concealed his inner feelings behind an almost impenetrable wall of reserve. Adams, by his own confession,

was “a morose and surly politician.”¹⁴ Jefferson, if seldom a happy politician, proved amiable and sanguine. He was more impressed by the scope than by the limits of human possibilities. “My temperament is sanguine,” he would later tell Adams. “I steer my bark with Hope in the head, leaving Fear astern.” And if he did not classify the New Englander with “gloomy and hypochondriac minds” always full of foreboding, it would nevertheless sometimes be a fair description of his friend’s outlook.¹⁵ Finding himself awkward and churlish in social intercourse, Adams supposed the fault lay in the New England character, which he contrasted with “the art and address” of the southern gentlemen he met in Congress.¹⁶ Jefferson, of course, while not at all typical of the southern breed, possessed “art and address” in abundance, including those qualities of subtlety, grace, and refinement so conspicuously lacking in Adams. A friend of his youth remarked that he had “a little capillary vein of satire” meandering about in his soul which was as powerful as it was sudden.¹⁷ The Swiftian rapier did not suit Jefferson. He disapproved of satire and hid what little humor he had under “the pale cast of thought.” What was ludicrous in life was cause for regret rather than amusement. Expecting so much of men, and nations too, he could not laugh at their follies, least of all at his own. To Jefferson’s lofty idealism his friend opposed an obsessive realism, alternately stern or satiric as befitted his mood. While there was something endearing in Adams’ robust honesty—and Jefferson found it—it inevitably offended men with feelings scarcely less tender than his own and contributed to that unpopularity of which he would constantly complain.

The New Englander was, basically, an insecure person. His yearnings for fame, his notorious vanity and airs of conceit, grew from massive layers of self-doubt. In early manhood (occasionally afterwards) he kept a diary—another mark of his Puritan heritage—which was filled with upbraidings, self-catechizing questions, and self-improving resolutions. As late

as his thirty-seventh year of age, he could admonish himself, "Beware of idleness, luxury, and all vanity, folly, and vice!" Half his life had run out, and what a poor, insignificant atom he was! "Reputation," he often told himself, "ought to be the perpetual subject of my thoughts, and aim of my behavior."¹⁸ At last, with the onrush of revolution, he resolved to pursue reputation by power rather than by fortune. He found, as did Jefferson, new scope for his abilities. But even at the height of political achievement, he was plagued by anxieties. "I begin to suspect that I have not much of the grand in my composition," he confided to his ever-understanding wife Abigail in 1777.¹⁹ Then and later he felt his services and sacrifices were unappreciated. "I have a very tender, feeling heart," he wrote. "The country knows not, and never can know, the torments I have endured for its sake."²⁰ In time, he became morbid on the subject. Jefferson was rarely afflicted in this way. He was an Epicurean, though of sober mien, to whom emotional torment and self-flagellation were alien. Never in his life did he keep a personal diary. He kept records of everything—gardens, the weather, Indian languages—except the state of his soul. His self-possession, his easy, almost bland, sense of personal security left little room for inner questioning. Unlike the Yankee commoner, he did not have to scratch or fight his way to power. The road had been blazed for him by his father; in a sense, it went with his social position. He could, therefore, feel relaxed about it. Although endowed with a normal amount of ambition, it never became an obsession. Political power in itself held no charms for him. He often said that nature had destined him for the tranquil pursuits of the arts and sciences. None of the heroes of his early life, certainly not the Enlightenment trinity of Bacon, Newton, and Locke, was associated with political power. If that were taken away from him, it would have caused Jefferson no regrets, in fact would have afforded a welcome release to his talents in other and, he thought, better directions. Adams, who committed himself fully to the career and

the fame of a founding father, had no such reserves to fall back on.

The fact that one man came to the Revolution through Massachusetts politics, the other in Virginia, also made a difference. For Adams the torch had been ignited by James Otis' constitutional argument against the writs of assistance in 1761, while for Jefferson it was Patrick Henry's celebrated speech against the Stamp Act that had set "the ball of revolution" in motion. The true cause of the Revolution in Massachusetts, Adams believed, was "the conspiracy against liberty" hatched at the conclusion of the Great War by the local "court party" of Governor Francis Bernard, Thomas Hutchinson, and the brothers Andrew and Peter Oliver. It was this junta of high officials, not king and Parliament, that first plotted to tax Massachusetts with the base aim of increasing their own fortunes, securing their independence of the legislature, and establishing a local oligarchy. The enemy, then, was less the British government abroad than it was a corrupt Tory party at home. As late as 1775, Adams fixed the blame for British errors on the colonial Tories.²¹ This vivid sense of an internal struggle between "court" and "country" parties—one that threw Adams back into the political world of Walpole and Bolingbroke—was lacking in Virginia. There no Tory party threatened; notwithstanding factional quarrels at Williamsburg, the gentry stuck together, as they always had, and ruled without challenge except from the mother country. In Jefferson's mind, certainly, Britain was the culprit and no residue of affection, such as Adams would continue to feel, remained in him after 1776. Moreover, the popular agitation which radical Whigs used to stoke the revolutionary furnace in Massachusetts raised in Adams fears of upheaval from below such as were scarcely felt in Virginia. There the patricians, secure in their power, not only began the Revolution but ended it. Against the popular torrent Adams bravely defended Captain Thomas Preston and the British soldiers accused of murder in the Boston Massacre.

He was wary of the “mischievous democratic principles” of cousin Samuel and warned repeatedly against the “rage for innovation.”²² Years later he wondered if he should not repent for the “firebrands” he had himself thrown into the flames from 1765 forward.²³ Jefferson expressed no such fears. On the contrary, he thought Virginia could use a little of the “leveling spirit.” And the southern aristocrat went on to become the legendary apostle of democracy, while the northern bourgeois acquired the reputation of an apologist for order and hierarchy. Finally, because the war began in Massachusetts and the resources of the continent were wanted for her defense, Adams sought a strong confederation melting the states “like separate parcels of metal, into one common mass,” while Jefferson, with other Virginians and the great majority of Congress, saw neither the urgency nor the wisdom of this.²⁴ As the war progressed, Adams changed his mind, only to return to his earlier opinion a decade later.

Whatever may have been the cause of the American Revolution, the major issue in debate was the constitutional authority of Great Britain over the colonies. As Whigs of a more or less radical stamp, Adams and Jefferson tended to think alike on the issue and, barring small details, reached the same conclusions. What they sought in 1775 and earlier was not independence but reconciliation on the terms of the British constitution; yet as their theory of the constitution was in direct conflict with the regnant theory in Britain, the arguments they advanced unraveled the imperial relationship, forcing the ultimate choice of submission or independence. Jefferson addressed the issue in *A Summary View of the Rights of British America*, published in 1774, while Adams’ most labored constitutional argument appeared in the *Novanglus* essays of 1774–75.²⁵

The polemics offered two versions of the same theory of the empire and of American rights within it. From the beginning of the contest with the mother country, the Americans had

attempted to find some halfway house between total submission to the authority of Parliament, which British opinion demanded, and its total rejection. Generally, the line had been drawn between *external* and *internal* legislation, Parliament having authority in one sphere, as in the regulation of trade, but not in the other. Any line offered difficulties in theory as well as in practice, however. Since they were not represented in Parliament, the colonists claimed that it could not legislate for them, and the tradition of the English constitution lent support to the claim. But the new Whig theory of parliamentary supremacy, stemming from the Revolution of 1688, buttressed by the conventional political wisdom that rejected any idea of two sovereign authorities in the same state—the specter of *imperium in imperio*—proved troublesome for the Americans. Jefferson and Adams, therefore, repudiated the authority of Parliament altogether and set forth a new theory of the empire as a commonwealth of equal self-governing states owing allegiance to a common king. Jefferson reached this position by way of the argument that the Americans were the sons of expatriated men who had possessed the *natural* right “of going in quest of new habitations, and of there establishing new societies, under such laws and regulations as to them shall seem most likely to promote public happiness.” This right being natural, the colonists were as free as if they had returned to a state of nature; but, said Jefferson, they voluntarily chose to submit themselves to the British monarch, “who was thereby made the central link connecting the several parts of the empire thus newly multiplied.”²⁶ Adams’ reasoning was similar. America was a discovered, not a conquered, country; the first settlers had a natural right, which they exercised, to set up their own governments and enact their own laws consistent with their obligations to the king. These obligations, in the Massachusetts case, were contained in a royal charter, a *compact* with the king. Partly because of the crucial role of this compact in the history of Massachusetts, for which there was no equiva-

lent in Virginia, Adams' argument was more historical and legalistic than Jefferson's. But both appealed to the past in the defense of rights that were basically moral and, in the final analysis, must be justified on the law of nature.

The advanced position staked out by these writings, adopted in spirit though not in form by Congress, placed the responsibility for reconciliation on the shoulders of George III. He alone held the scepter of the empire. The *Summary View* ended with an appeal to his justice: "No longer persevere in sacrificing the rights of one part of the empire to the inordinate desires of another, but deal out to all equal and impartial right."²⁷ The anomaly of American Whigs appealing from Parliament to the king did not go unnoticed. "Their language . . . was that of Toryism," Lord North sneered.²⁸ George III was himself too good a Whig to side with the Americans against Parliament. Their "humble petitions" were answered with muskets and cannon.

It is difficult to say just when Adams and Jefferson gave up the hope of reconciliation and became advocates of independence. For several months after the fighting began both supported armed resistance as a means of bringing Britain to her senses and winning a settlement on American terms. But Britain proved incorrigible. Adams later claimed that he was the constant advocate of independence from the reassembling of Congress after the August recess of 1775. Yet in January of the new year he said that independence was "utterly against my inclinations" and a few weeks later stated his position as "reconciliation if practicable and peace if attainable," quickly adding that he thought both impossible.²⁹ Jefferson's posture was much the same. Reconciliation was his desire, but rather than submit to British pretensions to legislate for America he would "sink the whole island in the ocean."³⁰ Neither man, it seems fair to say, rushed into independence, but both were willing to risk it and, further, to demand it if resistance within the empire failed of solution. There were sound political reasons for soft-

pedaling independence in the winter of 1775–76. The delegates of the middle colonies, in particular, were firmly opposed to the ultimate step, to which they believed the Massachusetts brace of Adams covertly aimed. Independence could not be declared until a public opinion had been created for it up and down the continent. This was the work of Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* early in the new year. With a popular political rhetoric neither Adams nor Jefferson commanded, Paine transformed independence from a frightful bugaboo to a captivating vision. In the puffery of his old age, Adams denigrated Paine, saying that *Common Sense* was a mere distillation of his own speeches in Congress for the preceding nine months.³¹ Jefferson knew better and always praised Paine's service to the cause.

"Every post and every day rolls in upon us," Adams rejoiced in May, "Independence like a torrent."³² His principal concern at this time was for the establishment of new constitutional governments in all the colonies, which would make independence a *fait accompli* and also ensure the maintenance of civil order. Congress finally passed his and Lee's resolution for this purpose—"a machine to fabricate independence"—on May 15. Three weeks later it debated the Virginia resolution calling upon Congress to declare the thirteen colonies free and independent states. Although the vote was postponed, a five-man committee was appointed to prepare a declaration of independence. Rather surprisingly, Jefferson found himself named at the head of the committee whose leading members were Benjamin Franklin and Adams. Jefferson's later testimony was that the committee asked him to draft the proposed paper. Adams, on the other hand, remembered a conversation in which Jefferson tried to persuade him to do it. He demurred for three reasons: "Reason first—You are a Virginian, and a Virginian ought to appear at the head of this business. Reason second—I am obnoxious, suspected, and unpopular. You are very much otherwise. Reason third—You can write ten times better than I

can.”³³ If the conversation actually occurred, Adams later found reason to regret his decision. In time the authorship of the Declaration of Independence gave Jefferson an *éclat* with the public that all of Adams’ revolutionary services could not match, and he resented it.

But supposing Adams had written the Declaration of Independence, would it have been a very different document? In point of style, it would surely have been less elevated but perhaps more vigorous, less mannered and more natural, less trim and direct and more long-winded. The body of the work, with its bill of particulars against the king, would have been similar because these charges had been more or less codified by Congress during the preceding months. It seems unlikely, however, that Adams would have, or could have, duplicated Jefferson’s feat in the preamble. In a document intended to justify the colonies’ separation from Great Britain, Jefferson seized the occasion to advance in axiomatic terms a political philosophy for the new nation. Capsuling the principles in electrifying phrases—“all men are created equal,” “unalienable rights . . . life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness,” “the consent of the governed”—he gave the Revolution a sense of direction at once moral and political and raised the American cause above parochialism, above history, by uniting it with the cause of mankind. This was a triumph. Not that there was anything original in this philosophy of liberty; as Jefferson himself said years afterwards, when it became fashionable in some quarters, even at the Adams homestead, to belittle the Declaration as a hackneyed performance, he had aimed not to discover new principles or to say new things but “to place before mankind the common sense of the subject.”³⁴ It was Adams’ “common sense” too, of course. But what was so remarkable about Jefferson’s achievement was the ease and completeness with which he transcended the older historical and legal defenses and embraced the rationalism and universalism of the natural rights philosophy, thereby associating the

American Revolution with the aspirations of the Enlightenment. Adams, with a mind more closely bound to the past, could not have made this leap into the future.

Jefferson showed both Adams and Franklin a rough draft of the Declaration, and neither had much to suggest in the way of changes. From the committee the final draft went to Congress on June 28. There, after voting the Virginia resolution for independence on July 2, the delegates debated Jefferson's handiwork for two and one-half days. Many changes were made, nearly all of them for the worse in his opinion. He was especially incensed by the elimination of the angry paragraph indicting the king for waging "cruel war against human nature itself" by forcing on the colonies the traffic in African slaves. Adams doubtless supported his friend on this question, as on every other. He was "the colossus" in the debate, Jefferson later said, the Declaration's "pillar of support on the floor of Congress, its ablest advocate and defender against the multifarious assaults it encountered." And even after some of Adams' aspersions on the document came to public notice decades later, Jefferson generously praised "the zeal and ability" with which he had fought for "every word" of it in Congress.³⁵ Oddly enough, neither man sent up any huzzahs upon the adoption of the Declaration of Independence. Adams thought the landmark decision had been taken earlier, on July 2. That was the crucial action; Jefferson's paper only declared it. He wrote to Abigail: "The second day of July, 1776, will be the most memorable epocha in the history of America. I am apt to believe it will be celebrated by succeeding generations as the great anniversary festival. It ought to be commemorated, as the day of deliverance, by solemn acts of devotion to God Almighty. It ought to be solemnized with pomp and parade . . . from one end of the continent to the other, from this time forward, forevermore."³⁶ He prophesied the celebrity of American independence with future generations but was off the mark as to the anniversary date. Obviously, neither he nor

Jefferson fully appreciated in 1776 the power of words, great words, to symbolize action and to become its monument.

For several months the two congressmen had been turning their thoughts to the creation of new governments in the colony-states. The uncertainty on what new governments would succeed the old could be viewed as an obstacle to independence or, as by Adams and Jefferson, a glorious opportunity. It was, the former declared, “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!”³⁷ Jefferson also felt the challenge. The creation of new government, he said, “is the whole object of the present controversy.”³⁸ But no one responded more eagerly or more soberly to the challenge than Adams. Months before independence was declared he had been calling for the formation of new governments. All the books he had read on the theory and practice of government now found immediate application, and he went back to reread them. There was no more agreeable employment than researches “after the best form of government,” he said. Politics was “the divine science”—“the first in importance”—and, while centuries behind most other sciences, he hoped that in this ripening “age of political experiments” it would overtake the rest.³⁹ When several southern delegates came to Adams in the early months of 1776 seeking advice on the planning of new state governments, he wrote out his ideas in a brief epistolary essay which was so much admired by those who saw it that he consented to its publication, anonymously, under the title *Thoughts on Government, in a Letter from a Gentleman to his Friend*.⁴⁰ Adams later said that the letter was written to counteract the plan of government loosely advanced by that “disastrous meteor” Thomas Paine, in *Common Sense*. Paine’s crude and half-lettered ideas, got up to please the popular party in Pennsylvania and taken up by no less a personage than Benja-

min Franklin, threatened much harm, in Adams' opinion. The plan was "too democratical," mainly because it concentrated all power in a single representative assembly. It was also too simple, for Paine supposed that in government as in nature the simpler anything is the less likely is it to get out of order. Adams, on the contrary, drawing upon a tradition tracing back through Machiavelli to Aristotle, made it an axiom of his political science that all simple government, whether monarchy, aristocracy, or democracy, is bad, and complex government, mixing and balancing opposing principles, is good.

In the *Thoughts on Government* Adams began by insisting, against Alexander Pope, on the importance of the *form* of government, then went on to show that the *republican* form is the best. Borrowing from Montesquieu's theory on the unique spirit appropriate to the different forms of government, agreeing that the spirit of republics is *virtue*, selfless devotion to the commonweal, Adams reasoned that since the practice of virtue produces the greatest happiness to the greatest number of people, a republic is the best form of government. A virtuous people makes a republic possible; its survival makes the cultivation of virtue necessary. But what is a republic? Adams always had trouble defining it. It is "an empire of laws, and not of men," he said. But this described the principle of constitutionalism, not the form of government, and implied that a government of unjust laws, laws against natural right, might be republican. At other times Adams said a republic is a government in which the people have "an essential share" in the sovereign power.⁴¹ Nearly all the American Whigs in 1776 favored republican government, perhaps not unlike the governments they were used to but with written constitutions and the vices of monarchy eliminated. The issue was how popular, how democratic, these new republics should be. And here Adams, as compared to Paine, or even Jefferson, took a moderate position. In his view, and by either of his definitions, the British government was a type of republic, one in which the

three pure forms, monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy, were ingeniously balanced in king, lords, and commons. Like most colonial Americans and most enlightened Europeans, Adams had been taught to admire the "most stupendous fabric of human invention," the British constitution, but unlike Jefferson and so many others whose admiration sank in the decade before the Revolution, Adams venerated it to the end of his days as "a masterpiece."⁴² Unfortunately, it was not made for the government of colonies; independence came about because the Americans were denied the most valuable part of the constitution, democratic representation.

Holding these views, Adams experienced some difficulty formulating a conception of American republicanism detached from the British model. He was not alone in this; certain categories and dogmas of the British constitution survived in Jefferson's mind too. But for Adams the problem increased rather than lessened after 1776, and compared to his mature political theory, *Thoughts on Government* was a democratic document. It followed from the definition of a republic that the constitution should be so contrived as to secure an impartial "government of laws." The representative assembly should be an exact portrait in miniature of the interests among the people at large. Because of the wide distribution of property in America, at least in New England, this would ensure substantial democracy. But no government in a single assembly could long preserve the freedom and happiness of the people. Absolute power, from whatever source derived, must inevitably grow corrupt and tyrannical. And so Adams called for an upper house to check the lower and a first magistrate with an unqualified negative on the legislature. He also called for an independent judiciary, rotation in office, annual elections, and so on, which were the clichés of old Whig political science.

Jefferson could cheerfully endorse most of what Adams recommended. The differences between them at this time did not fundamentally concern the form or structure of govern-

ment but the extent of the government's commitment to the ideals of freedom and equality declared in the country's birth-right. On balance, Adams was more interested in restoring order than in promoting reform. He eschewed radical experiments, such as Pennsylvania's, and wished the Americans might glide as insensibly as possible into lawful governments. Generally, his plan conformed to the better colonial models, such as that of Massachusetts, and it left the society unchanged. Even as he advocated republican government, he was beset by fears for its success from the want of virtue in the people. America had more of it than other nations, and New England more of it than the rest of America, yet this new people, for all the blessings of Divine Providence, was not exempted from the common vices of humanity. There was so much littleness and selfishness, so much disrespect for rank and status, so much luxury and avarice and talent for political corruption, even in New England, that wise and honest men might soon look to the security of a monarch. To his good friend Mercy Warren, he confessed, "I sometimes tremble to think that, although we are engaged in the best cause that ever employed the human heart, yet the prospect of success is doubtful not for the want of power or of wisdom but of virtue."⁴³

Jefferson had a more consoling philosophy for a republican, one which assumed the virtue of the people from an innate moral sense in every man and diminished the role of the state in the regulation of human affairs. With his image of a naturally beneficent and harmonious society, an image derived from philosophy rather than experience, government simply did not have for him the preeminent importance Adams assigned to it. Its primary purpose was to secure individuals in their natural rights and thereby to liberate them for action in society. In Jefferson's view government should be absorbed into society, becoming truly self-government, while Adams believed that society must be absorbed into government, reproduced in it, and regulated by it. Theories of human nature

help to explain the difference. Adams, although he thought Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Mandeville had painted human nature too black, without any color of benevolence, nevertheless felt that “self-love” was the dominant passion in men and that government must deal with it. Jefferson, in opposition to these philosophers, believed that the moral sense, in which all men were equal, naturally led them to seek the good of others and to live justly in society.⁴⁴ He regarded man primarily as a social animal, naturally made for society; Adams regarded man as a political animal, constantly competing for power and therefore, in Paine’s metaphor, but beyond Paine’s reasoning, requiring government as “the badge of his lost innocence.” Similarly, in their attitudes toward history, Adams found political wisdom in the past and thought that the future, whatever its advances, would repeat the experience of the past, while for Jefferson the past was the habitation of specters to be vanquished by reason. History was valuable chiefly for its admonitions, and he became an authentic spokesman of the progressive hopes of the Enlightenment. The future was written in nature, not in history.

Both men framed constitutions for their native states. When he was in Congress in the spring of 1776, Jefferson drafted a fundamental law for Virginia and forwarded it to the revolutionary convention meeting in Williamsburg.⁴⁵ It arrived too late for serious consideration, however; and had it arrived earlier, Jefferson’s plan might not have received that consideration, for it was widely at variance with the conservative constitution adopted for Virginia. Except that it stripped away all semblance of monarchical power, the new government was like the old. It did not in any way alter the distribution of power in Virginia society. It continued the freehold suffrage qualification under which one-third or more of the adult white males were disenfranchised, the unequal system of representation which favored the East over the West—“old” Virginia over “new” Virginia—and it consolidated the oligarchical power of

the local authorities, the county courts. Influenced in part by Adams' *Thoughts on Government*, the Virginia Constitution was an instrument neither of democracy nor of reform.

Jefferson's plan also contained conservative features. He was as eager as Adams, for instance, to divide the legislative power and to secure through an upper house, or senate, a kind of aristocratic check on the annually elected popular assembly. But he had difficulty finding a logical basis for differentiating the two houses of a consistently republican legislature. He had at first thought of life appointment of senators, then quickly rejected it, as he also rejected the solution that would be adopted in several of the new state constitutions of founding the lower house on numbers (population) and the upper on property. Finally, he decided on election of the senators by the popular body for staggered terms of nine years, yet was unhappy with this solution. The English theory of balanced government hung in his mind, a ruin from the past, for which he could find no satisfactory place in the political creed of the Revolution. But Jefferson, unlike Adams, gradually got rid of intellectual survivals such as this one as he matured a democratic philosophy of government.

In accordance with that philosophy, still inchoate in 1776, Jefferson proposed in his draft constitution to extend the suffrage to all taxpayers, thus beginning the breakdown of the centuries-old freehold suffrage; to eliminate property qualifications for officeholders, shutting off the monopoly of an elite and opening the government to the society at large; to secure fair and equal representation geographically by proportioning the lower house of the legislature to the rule of numbers; and to make a start towards local democracy by giving the people the election of certain county offices. Jefferson's constitution also embodied a number of far-reaching institutional reforms: the disestablishment of the Anglican Church and absolute religious freedom, the replacement of Virginia's bloody criminal code with one framed on humane and enlightened stan-

dards, the abolition of laws of entail and primogeniture together with other measures intended to diffuse landed property among the mass of people, and the mitigation of slavery. The Virginia Constitution of 1776 neither embodied these reforms nor envisioned them. It contained no article for future amendment or revision. Moreover, because the convention acted without delegated authority from the people, and they had not given their consent to the constitution, it lacked the essential requirements of republican legitimacy, in Jefferson's opinion.

Jefferson became a declared enemy of the Virginia Constitution. Repeatedly, over many years, he tried to replace it with a more democratic instrument, but failed. Partly because of his concern over the course of the Revolution in Virginia, he retired from Congress in September 1776, returned home, and immediately entered the General Assembly in Williamsburg. For several years, he worked to secure fundamental reforms, those already mentioned but others as well, such as a comprehensive plan of public education, viewing the whole as "a system by which ever fiber would be eradicated of ancient and feudal aristocracy, and a foundation laid for a government truly republican."⁴⁶ The reformation was at best half-successful. If, for example, the assembly finally enacted his great Bill for Religious Freedom, it flatly rejected his Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge, which he came to think more important than any other for the future of freedom and self-government. He was not a flaming radical at this time, or at any time. He was a committed revolutionist, rather far to the left on the political spectrum in America; but he would not go to radical lengths to secure his objectives—his personal temperament precluded that—and he was still struggling to escape the chrysalis of the English Whig tradition, as his dilemma about the senate makes clear. What is remarkable about Jefferson, however, in contradistinction to Adams, was his capacity for political growth and adaptation. His vision was

forward and he grew in democratic directions with his age and country. He came to realize that even his own ideas for Virginia's government in 1776 fell short of the principles of the Revolution. "In truth," he reflected, "the abuses of monarchy had so much filled the space of political contemplation, that we imagined everything republican which was not monarchy. We had not yet penetrated to the mother principle that 'governments are republican only in proportion as they embody the will of the people, and execute it.'"⁴⁷

If Jefferson failed to become the republican solon of Virginia, Adams was largely successful in Massachusetts. In the fall of 1779, during an interlude between diplomatic missions abroad, he was elected by his Braintree constituents to represent them in a constitutional convention. The citizens of Massachusetts had previously rejected a constitution offered by the legislature; and part of the significance of the convention was that it would be elected by the people for the specific purpose of framing a fundamental law, which would then be referred to them for approval or disapproval. The Massachusetts constitutional convention of 1779–80 thus gave finished form to the process by which a people may establish a government with their own consent. Both Adams and Jefferson contributed to the revolutionary theory describing this process. In the convention, Adams was given the responsibility of submitting a working draft; and since few changes were made in it, either in committee or on the floor, the honor of the Massachusetts Constitution belonged to him.⁴⁸ Although it seemed designed to make as little change as possible in the customary frame of government, it was a more elaborate document than any of the constitutions Jefferson drafted for Virginia. Adams' preamble reiterated the principles of the Declaration of Independence. This was followed by a declaration of rights, derived from George Mason's seminal work engrafted on the Virginia Constitution. (Surprisingly, in view of his later position, none of Jefferson's proposed constitutions included a declaration or

bill of rights.) There was more than literary significance in Adams' phrasing of certain principles generally shared with Jefferson. Thus he wrote "all men are born equally free and independent," which, as Adams knew, was not the same as saying "all men are created (or born) equal." The convention substituted Jefferson's more egalitarian accent. Adams was not responsible for Article III—the most controversial provision of the constitution—making it the duty of the legislature, and in turn of the various towns and parishes, to support religion, yet this was consistent with the aim of the document as a whole to ensure that Massachusetts remain a Christian commonwealth. Jefferson, in Virginia, was fighting a bill that would require the state to support Christian churches without preference as to sect on a plan not dissimilar to that adopted in Massachusetts; and he would have found equally objectionable the religious test Adams wished to demand of officeholders. The convention eliminated the test, except for the chief magistrate, but embarked on the new experiment in establishment of religion.

With regard to the frame of government, Adams followed the main outlines of his *Thoughts on Government*. The legislature would be in three parts, the house, the senate, and the governor, as Adams conceived the British one to be. The governor would be popularly elected, which he had not proposed in 1776, and vested with large powers including an absolute negative on the laws. The convention gave him only a qualified negative, or suspensive veto; but in the creation of a strong executive, overriding the antimonarchical sentiments of the Revolution, the Massachusetts Constitution was unique in its time. Increasingly, Adams viewed the executive power as the mainstay of a balanced constitution, and he thought the trimming of the governor's negative the only serious error of the convention. He solved the problem of the senate by proportioning its membership to the amount of taxes paid in the several electoral districts, that is to say, basing it on property.

The wealthier the district the more power it would have in the senate. In addition to its relevance for the Whig theory of balance, the solution conformed to the favorite axiom of James Harrington, "power always follows property," which Adams said was "as infallible a maxim in politics as that action and reaction are equal in mechanics."⁴⁹ Adams, and the convention, maintained, indeed somewhat increased, the property qualification for the franchise. Land had been widely distributed from the beginning in Massachusetts. This had not been the case in Virginia, of course; there the balance of property was against equal liberty. And so it was possible for Adams to cherish the colonial past and adhere to the Harringtonian rule consistently with his republican objectives, while for Jefferson these objectives required a break with the past and could scarcely be entertained on that rule, certainly not without reform of the laws governing landholding. Conservatism and republicanism might go together for the New Englander; they were often at odds for the Virginian. Comparatively few men were barred from the franchise in Massachusetts for want of sufficient property; nevertheless, Adams stood out against abandoning the freehold qualification. To do so would be "to confound and destroy all distinctions, and prostrate all ranks to one coarse level," he said.⁵⁰ Significantly, too, property and office were firmly joined in the Massachusetts Constitution. Representatives, senators, and the governor would be made eligible for their offices by an ascending scale of property holding. In these features Adams' frame of government was distinctly conservative, and he later thought it acquired for him "the reputation of a man of high principles and strong notions in government, scarcely compatible with republicanism."⁵¹

Adams was in France, on a second diplomatic mission, when the Massachusetts Constitution was ratified. Henceforth his career in the American Revolution was on the European stage where he worked in the shadow of the eminent Dr. Franklin to secure the money, arms, and friends necessary to win the war

and establish American independence. With Franklin and John Jay, he was one of the negotiators of the Treaty of Peace. Jefferson, meanwhile, served as governor of Virginia during two difficult years, 1779 to 1781, which ended in the humiliation of the government and the virtual prostration of the state by British troops. He retired to Monticello under a cloud and, stung by criticism of his leadership, resolved never to return to public life. He and Adams occasionally exchanged letters about the affairs of war and the seemingly desperate cause of confederation, letters that are proof of political friendship, though not of personal intimacy. Had Jefferson kept his resolution, the friendship would have expired with the war; but he did not, in part because of the tragedy of his wife's death, and in 1784 he and Adams were back in harness together.

For Adams the American Revolution was finished. Independence had been won, new republican governments established in the states, and the confederation completed. In later years he liked to say that the Revolution was over before a drop of blood was shed or independence declared. "The revolution was in the minds and hearts of the people, and in the union of the colonies, both of which were substantially effected before hostilities commenced."⁵² However admirable the patriotic sentiment, Jefferson could not agree. Adams was looking through the wrong end of the telescope. The Revolution had only fairly begun in 1776, nor had it ended in 1783. It was not past but prologue. Yet even Jefferson's anticipations fell far short of what the future would disclose. "We have it in our power to begin the world over again," *Common Sense* had declared.⁵³ This was inspired prophesy, the truth of which would come to Jefferson through the French Revolution rather than the American.