

# 1242

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**Our Uncles: An Odd Couple**

Everyone knows that George Washington is recognized as the Father of our Country, but our country was also most blessed to have in its founding families two uncles, a very odd couple, who together, sometimes in agreement, but often times not, created a synergy that launched our country in a rebellion against, and ultimately victory over, England, at the time the most powerful nation in the world. At the outset of our struggle for freedom from England, the odds were against our odd couple. Yet, they never wavered in a mutual, fervent belief that our country ought to be free from English control and exploitation. Our uncles had the prescience to discern and articulate the grievances our fledging nation had against King George, and they joined together with other enlightened colonists to break the shackles of English colonial domination. After our political separation from England was won at Yorktown, our Uncles led our country under a new constitution, as our CEO's, in divergent ways, in an attempt to define the meaning of our Revolution to our citizens and to the other nations around the world. Finally, after a decade of bitter political differences and acrimony that ripped the heart out of their earlier friendship, our odd couple reconciled in their final years and through their letters provided history an incomparable exchange of ideas and reflections upon the struggle of our country for freedom.

I am sure it is obvious to you now about whom I'm speaking: John Adams and Thomas Jefferson: the original odd couple. They were an incongruous pair, but the inexorable spirit of 1776 made them a pair that history can never forget or ignore. Their differences were obvious;

everything about them was in contrast. Adams was short, stout, candid to a fault, a Yankee. Jefferson was tall, elegant, a bit of a dandy, an elusive Virginian. Adams was hot-tempered, confrontational, who loved an argument. Jefferson was cool, self-contained, eschewed debate and direct political confrontation. He often espoused his views on government through political operatives, such as James Madison. No question - they were the odd couple of the American Revolution.

Still their backgrounds and breeding were very similar. Adams, the elder of the two, was born in Braintree, Massachusetts in 1735. His parents and ancestors were prominent citizens in the Boston area since 1640. Adams was trained in Latin and the classics, was admitted to Harvard where he studied science, literature, metaphysics and debate. As a career, he considered the ministry, which he soon found not quite as interesting as law, medicine, or public service. After graduation from Harvard, he accepted a teaching position, but soon tired of his pupils: he called them "little rutlings" who barely knew their ABC's. He decided upon a career in law, and through family connections, he was introduced to the Boston Bar where he quickly became a prominent attorney known for his quick wit and sharp tongue. He protested against the Stamp Act, and provided leadership for similar remonstrations in New England. He was a man of principles, risking his reputation in the Boston legal and political community, by representing eight British soldiers who were charged with the murder of five citizens in the "Boston Massacre." The trial ended in an acquittal for all of his clients. Adams was a chatterbox, (particularly by Jefferson's standards), a flirt. His friends described him as lively, pungent, and naturally amiable. Jefferson wrote, "It was impossible not to warm to him." He was so widely read that he could talk on almost any subject, sail off in almost any direction. He was not a man

of any particular means. He never owned a slave, one of the few in the Continental Congress who did not own a black man as his servant.

In 1759, Adams met Abigail Smith, no more than 5' tall, dark brown hair, and brown eyes. Over the next five years they courted; on October 25, 1764, Adams had the good fortune of marrying Abigail. A loving and caring wife and mother, she was also his political confidant and advisor and his defender in times of political calumniation: personal attacks on his integrity and politics.

Jefferson was born in 1743, eight years Adams junior. He was born into a prominent Virginia family, the son of Peter Jefferson, a successful planter, explorer, and member of the Virginia House of Burgesses. His mother, Jane Randolph, was also a member of a famous Virginia family. Like Adams, Jefferson was well educated with a thorough grounding in the Greek and Latin classics, science, and philosophy. He read law under George Wythe, the greatest law teacher of his generation in Virginia. He was admitted to the bar in 1767. Fortunately, while a successful lawyer, Jefferson never had to rely on legal fees to support himself. He had inherited a considerable amount of land from his father, and his holdings doubled when he married Martha Skelton in 1772. However, this inheritance from his wife's side also imposed a debt on Jefferson, which burdened him throughout his life.

Jefferson usually gave deference to Adams because of his seniority, but this deference did not translate into a political harmony between our odd couple, in fact, they agreed to disagree on most issues that surfaced after the Revolution and after the adoption of our Constitution in 1789.

## **Where Did Their Paths Cross?**

### **Continental Congress (1774-1776)**

In 1774, Adams had been chosen by the Massachusetts Legislature as one of five delegates to the first Continental Congress in Philadelphia. At the outset, Adams believed that independence from England was the only way to gain liberty for the colonies. He appreciated the debates on the question of independence, and listened intently to the differing views expressed by various members of the Congress. He realized that if a decision was forced on Congress too soon the results could be disastrous. Independence could be shelved by a majority vote of the members. Yet, he felt very strongly that the longer independence was put off, more difficulties would arise in the course of the colonies' struggle with England. Adams joined Benjamin Franklin, an ardent supporter of independence, in the belief that there could be no terms of reconciliation with England that would be acceptable to the colonies. In contrast to Franklin, who was eerily silent in floor debates, Adams could not hold his tongue. He fought any attempt to extend an olive branch to England. He had seen with his own eyes what the British had done at Lexington and Concord. He had no understanding of how any member of the Congress could have any misconception about what to expect from the British. Adams wrote, "powder and artillery are the most efficacious, sure and infallible conciliatory means we can adopt." He was a hawk.

On May 9, 1776, Adams put forth a resolution recommending that the colonies assume all powers of government, to secure "the happiness and safety of their constituents, in particular, and America in general." After a lengthy and fierce floor debate lasting three days, Adams penned a preamble that precluded any possibility of reconciliation with the Crown and all but declared the colonies immediately independent. He concluded, "It is therefore necessary that the exercise of every kind of authority under the said Crown should be totally suppressed, and all the powers of government be exerted under the authority of the people of the colonies, for the

preservation of internal peace, virtue, and good order, as well as the defense of their lives, liberties, and properties, against hostile invasions and cruel depredations of their enemies.”

Jefferson first arrived in Philadelphia as a member of the Virginia Delegation in 1775. Prior to his election to the Continental Congress, Jefferson had been active in Virginia politics, particularly in chronicling the grievances of the Colonies against England, but his responsibilities had been local. But now his responsibilities broaden; he now was unmistakably an American, a champion of natural rights, which should not be confined by any boundary. While he did not enter into the disputations on the legislative floor, Adams, whom he had met for the first time, found him to be prompt, frank, explicit and decisive. This was the beginning of their historic relationship, swirling between affection and enmity over the next fifty years. Adams recognized immediately that Jefferson was a learned man and had “a happy talent for composition.” Adams reported to a friend that Jefferson “was the greatest rubber off of dust that he’d ever met with, that he had learned French, Italian, Spanish and wanted to learn German.” Immediately, both became respected leaders in the Congress, even though they had different styles and personalities.

Jefferson was described as a lanky, freckled youth.

Adams was a people person. Jefferson was more somber, some even considered him aloof.

Adams revealed his innermost thoughts regularly, particularly in a diary. Jefferson rarely revealed his inner feelings in what he wrote.

Adams had a sense of humor; Jefferson was thought to be more or less humorless.

Adams was blunt, assertive and seldom in doubt about what he felt about a subject.

Jefferson was known for his graciousness, politeness, and diplomacy.

During debates in the Congress, Jefferson, like Franklin, scarcely said a word, and if he did, it was in a weak voice that could hardly be heard. He had been advised by Franklin, “Never contradict anybody.”

Adams was vociferous and thrived on disputations. In later years, Adams wrote to a friend, “I never heard Jefferson say three sentences together.”

Adams was a devout Christian. Jefferson appeared sometimes to be irreverent which caused some consternation among his peers.

Their backgrounds and their roots were part of the reason for their different personalities. Massachusetts and Virginia were like different countries. Adams was raised on a farm; Jefferson was born to landed aristocracy. Jefferson considered himself a man of wealth, and he lived like one. His life was involved with economics and his way of life was built on slaves and debt. In contrast, John Adams had neither debts nor slaves, and he abhorred the idea of either.

Despite these vast differences in background and culture, by the spring of 1776 Jefferson was as committed as Adams to the colonies’ cause for independence. They shared a common zeal for separation from the Crown, and a passionate devotion to the cause of liberty. They realized they were participating with other members of Congress in one of history’s turning points. They concentrated their diverse talents to serve this common purpose. They were able to replace personal differences with a common goal of freedom for American citizens. But these differences did not disappear; they smoldered in the first decade of our country, and they reappeared in the crucible of the late eighteenth century politics.

In the Continental Congress by the spring of 1776 the tide had turned; a majority of the members of the Congress espoused independence from England. The pace quickened. In May, Washington met with the Congress for two days to report his concern for the situation at New

York, where a British attack was expected with 17,000 German troops employed by the King George to fight for the British cause.

The members received news that the Virginia Convention had unanimously instructed the Virginia Delegation “to declare the United Colonies free and independent states”. Adams was exulted. He wrote to Patrick Henry “the natural course and order of things was coming to pass at last, and the decree is gone forth, and it cannot be recalled, that a more equal liberty had prevailed in other parts of the Earth must be established in America.”

On June 7, the prominent Virginian, Richard Henry Lee, a spirited orator, rose and made the following resolve: “That these United Colonies are, and of right ought to be, free and independent states, that they are absolved from all allegiance to the British Crown, and that all political connection between them and the state of Britain is, and ought to be, totally dissolved.”

Adams seconded the motion with great élan. Still there was a pocket of opposition led by John Dickinson and Edward Rutledge. They argued that any declaration of independence must wait until “the voice of the people drove them to it.” But Adams, Lee, and George Wythe, countered Dickinson’s argument by saying that public opinion was ahead of Congress and that “the people wait for us to lead the way.” Debate continued through June. By early July, the Delegates agreed the time had come to declare a declaration of independence. A committee was appointed, the Committee of Five as it became known, consisting of Jefferson, Adams, Roger Sherman, Robert Livingston, and Benjamin Franklin.

Jefferson was selected to draft the declaration. Jefferson and Adams would have differing explanations of how Jefferson got the job.

According to Adams, Jefferson proposed that he, Adams, do the writing, but that he (Adams) declined, telling Jefferson he must do it.

“Why,” Jefferson asked as Adams recounted.

“Reason enough,” Adams said.

“What could be your 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 three: You can write ten times better than I can.”

So Jefferson wrote our Declaration of Independence at the bequest of Adams. The odd couple cooperated to bring about the first great document in American history.

The official break with England was July 2<sup>nd</sup> with twelve of the thirteen colonies voting for the break with only New York abstaining. Adams realized the momentousness of the occasion and in a long letter to Abigail he poured out his feelings: “The 2<sup>nd</sup> day of July, 1776 will be the most memorable epic in the history of America. I am apt to believe that 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, with shows, games, sports, guns, bells, bonfires, and illuminations from one end of this continent to the other from this time forward evermore.

How prophetic these statements were.

Yet the official passage did not occur until July 4<sup>th</sup>. Congress had to review and approve the language of the drafted declaration before it could be made official. Members suggested changes to the declaration, about a quarter of which were adopted. It was reported that Jefferson never uttered a word in protest or in defense of what he had written. References to the horrors of the slave trade which Jefferson blamed on King George were removed because South Carolina and Georgia objected. Neither Adams nor Jefferson nor other delegates would let the issue of

slaves in the colonies jeopardize a Declaration of Independence, however strong their personal feelings. The final vote was taken on July 4<sup>th</sup>, and through Jefferson's brilliant and eloquent composition, the colonies renounced their allegiance to the King and proclaimed the birth of a new nation, the United States of America.

### **Abroad: The Odd Couple in Paris**

In October, 1779, Adams was sent by Congress to Paris to negotiate a peace treaty with England. Elbridge Gary, an old friend, wrote to Adams, "Upon the whole, I am of the opinion that in the esteem of Congress, your character is as high as any gentleman in America".

Adams' tenure in Paris was rocky. The French court and its ministers disliked Adams and his style. He meddled in the French political arena where others would have feared to tread. Adams' strong independent spirit also stirred debates in Congress. On June 15, 1781, succumbing to the dictates of the French court, Adams' power as sole peacemaker with the British was revoked. In its place, Congress appointed five commissioners to attempt to negotiate the peace. Included in these commissioners was Jefferson. But, Jefferson never made it to Paris, being too busy in the Virginia political process. Over the next two years, Franklin, John Jay, and Adams negotiated a final peace treaty with England, which ushered in and recognized the new, independent United States of America. It is said by many historians that these three men (Franklin, Adams and Jay) had won the greatest victory in the annals of American diplomacy.

After the Revolutionary War ended, Jefferson was appointed by Congress in 1784 to join Adams and Franklin as commissioners in Paris. Just before Jefferson was set to sail to Paris, he appeared, unannounced, to introduce himself to Abigail who was going to join her husband for the first time in Paris. Jefferson wanted to know more about the commercial interest of New

England. He invited Abigail to sail with him, but she had made other arrangements, and so declined.

When Jefferson arrived in Paris, Adams was delighted to be joined again with his old friend in the Continental Congress. He wrote Elbridge Gary, “Jefferson is an excellent hand, you could not have made a better choice.” Over the next several years, a warm friendship developed (or may we say was rekindled) between the odd couple. Their diametrically different views of the American Revolution and its meaning to the American people still existed beneath the surface, but Paris is where the roots were grown for a lifelong bond between them that was to survive ultimately the volatile politics that were on the horizon.

John’s son, John Quincy, became a young protégé of Jefferson, often dining with him and enjoying Jefferson’s genius. While Adams’ years in Paris before the arrival of Jefferson were filled with frustration (particularly with Franklin) and a lapse into dispiritedness, after Jefferson’s arrival, Paris for Adams became an entirely different place, and Adams a different man. With Abigail now present, life was pleasant. Where he had fretted and had problems with Franklin, he enjoyed working with Jefferson. Abigail confided to Jefferson: “There had seldom been anyone in her husband’s life with whom he could associate with such perfect freedom and unreserve, and this meant the world to her.” She wrote that Jefferson was, “one of the cohesive ones of the Earth.”

In contrast, before his arrival in Paris, Jefferson’s perception of Adams was quite different. James Madison, Jefferson’s confidant and eyes and ears in Congress, had reported to Jefferson that Adams’ letters to Congress from France during the war years revealed nothing so much as his vanity, his prejudice against the French Court and venom against Franklin. These reflections about Adams made Jefferson question whether Adams could be effective as a

negotiator with the French. In a letter to Madison (encrypted), Jefferson likened Adams to a “poisonous weed.”

Before his arrival in Paris, Jefferson had made these contrasting observations about Adams: “He hates Franklin, he hates Jay, he hates the French, he hates the English, to whom will he adhere, His vanity is a lineament in his character which had entirely escaped me. His want of taste I had observed. Notwithstanding all this, he has a sound head on substantial points, and I think he has integrity. I am glad, therefore, that he is of the commission and expect he will be useful in it. His dislike of all parties, and all men, by balancing his prejudices, may give the same fair play to his reason. At any rate, honesty may be expected even from a poisonous weeds.”

Despite this preconceived view of Adams’ erratic behavior, Jefferson and Adams together with Franklin worked steadily together in an easy accord. They were attempting to negotiate commercial treaties with the nations of Europe; however, the going was slow with no notable results. Jefferson observed, “There is a want of competence in us.” America needed, and the commissioners were pressing, to obtain an equitable trade agreement with Britain. However, British-American relations had been strained since the Paris Peace treaty, and the British showed indifference to the Americans until the winter of 1784 when King George informed the commissioners that England would welcome an American minister to reside at the Court of St. James. Adams immediately thought, and rightfully so, that he would be the obvious choice of Congress to be the first ambassador to England.

On April 26, 1785, Jefferson delivered a note to Adams from Elbridge Gary informing Adams that he had been named minister to the Court of St. James. Jefferson was appointed to replace Franklin as ambassador to France. For both the Jefferson and Adams family, it was a

time of sadness. Adams had grown to enjoy his association with Jefferson at his home in Auteuil. He wrote to Richard Cranch, "I shall part with Mr. Jefferson with great regret."

In a parting conversation with French Foreign Minister Vergennes, Vergennes told Adams that it was a step down to go from the Court of France to any other Court, even if it is a "great thing to be the first ambassador from your country to the country you sprang from."

Jefferson called on the aging French foreign minister after the appointment of Adams to the Court of St. James. Vergennes said, "You replace Mr. Franklin, I hear?" Jefferson replied, "I succeed; no one can replace him."

After his arrival in England, Adams and Jefferson continued to write, exchanging 28 letters. They shared or exchanged views and opinions on issues of the day, speculated about potential markets for American tobacco in Europe, and other possible commercial markets for American business. They were concerned about a very serious problem: the demands for tribute from Barbary states of northern Africa, mainly Algiers, Tripoli, Tunis, and Morocco to insure that American ships would not be attacked.

## **The Odd Couple in England**

Jefferson visited Adams in England in March of 1786. Jefferson had an innate sensitivity about the British; he believed the British haughty. Jefferson recounted that King George III was "more ungracious to both him and Mr. Adams." He thought that they (the British) required to be kicked into common good manners." (The fact that many of Jefferson's debts were largely to British creditors may well have had something to do with such feeling ).

Not having made any progress with discussions and negotiations with the English over the price of peace with the pirates of Tripoli, Jefferson, and Adams took a tour of England. It

was the one time in their long, eventful lives that had no importance to history, but was an experience shared together, free of work and responsibility and a chance to enjoy each other's company and many mutual interests including farming, gardening, history and science. They visited new-styled English landscape gardens including Alexander Pope's Garden beside the Thames at Twickenham and Woodburn Farm. They visited Shakespeare's house in Stratford on Avon where Adams reported later that Jefferson upon arriving had gotten down on his knees and kissed the ground. They visited Edge Hill, scene of the first great battle of the English Civil War and later Worcester, the setting of Cromwell's final victory over Charles II in the year 1651. However, while it was the closest time they ever spent in each other's company, neither man recorded a word about the other.

Upon their return to London, Jefferson, an avid shopper, went on a spree, buying many consumer goods, including a microscope and a pair of satin Florentine breeches.

Commissioned by Adams, Mather Brown painted Jefferson's first portrait. On April 26, Jefferson and Adams, having accomplished nothing in the way of diplomatic progress, and with no reason to expect a change in the process, Jefferson said his goodbye and parted for Paris. It must have been a special time in their lives, an opportunity to bond (or in modern terms "quality time together"), isolated from the great causes and issues in which they had been engaged in the American political cauldron.

## **The Political Years**

Adams and Jefferson came together again in the first administration of George Washington. Neither Adams nor Jefferson had participated in the debates about the Constitution, which was adopted by the sovereign colonies and is the bulwark of our constitutional democracy.

Adams realized that the Constitution necessarily would bring about two different and varying views of what the American revolution was about. He realized his view of a constitutional government might place him in disrepute with other leaders (including Jefferson). He told a close friend: "Popularity was never my mistress, nor shall I ever be a popular man, but one thing I know, a man must be sensible of the errors of the people, and upon his guard against them, he must run the risk of their displeasure sometimes, or he will never do them any good in the long run." Even though Adams was not present during the constitutional debates, Adams' "thoughts on government" influenced the debates. Benjamin Rush, a member of the Constitutional Convention, wrote that Adams, in his writing about government had "diffused such excellent principles among us that there is little doubt of our adopting a vigorous and compound federal legislature." James Madison, who had taken the lead in drafting a Virginia plan, providing for three equal branches in the new government and who had seldom ever had anything complimentary to say about Adams, declared in a letter to Jefferson that while men of learning would find nothing new in the Adams' writing, it was certain to be a powerful engine in formulating public opinion and, in fact, had merit.

Both Adams and Jefferson were concerned about the absence of a Bill of Rights. Jefferson was also concerned about the possibility that the presidency could be turned into a monarchy. He wrote: "The president may be re-elected from four years to four years for life. I wish at the end of four years they made him ineligible a second time;" the first cry for "term limits."

In correspondence, the difference between Adams' and Jefferson's view of the Constitution was expressed by Adams, "You are afraid of the one, I, the few, we agree perfectly that the many should have full, fair and perfect representation in the House, you are apprehensive

of a monarchy; I, of Aristocracy. I would, therefore, have given more power to the President and less to the Senate.”

In the first election for President, it was a foregone conclusion that Washington would be elected President by the Electoral College. At this time, of course, there were no political parties, and no candidate openly campaigned for the Presidency. Washington was a Virginian, it was widely agreed that the vice-presidency should go to a northerner, and Adams was the leading choice. There was some concern whether Adams, blunt, stubborn, vain, and jealous, could serve in second place to Washington, particularly because of the difficulties he had had with Benjamin Franklin in Paris. As it turned out, these concerns were misconceived. Adams served Washington well even though Washington made no effort to bring him into the inner circle of his administration.

The electors met in February, 1789. Washington was unanimously chosen President with 69 votes while Adams, though well ahead of 10 others, had 34 votes. The second place finisher was Vice President. Adams was disappointed, his pride hurt, yet he did not know that Alexander Hamilton, worked against him in the State Legislators. Once Adams learned of Hamilton’s activities, he never forgave Hamilton. Neither Adams nor Jefferson liked Hamilton.

Jefferson was appointed by Washington as his Secretary of State. During his administration, there were political and international events that were of great consequence to our emerging nation, but which inevitably separated Adams and Jefferson politically. There were many Americans at the time, including Jefferson, who were accustomed to putting the interest of a region or state ahead of those of the nation, except possibly during war. Following the revolution, General Nathaniel Green had written to Washington from South Carolina, that, “Many people secretly wish that every state be completely independent and that as soon as our

public debts are liquidated the Congress should be no more.” The new constitution had been vehemently opposed by many patriots of the American Revolution as a threat to the rights of the states and thus to individual liberty. These divergent views divided Americans into two camps: the Federalists who wanted a strong federal government, and the anti-Federalists who held to the sentiment of Thomas Payne: “The government is best which governs least.” Adams (and Washington) embraced the Federalist view of government; Jefferson became the patron saint of the anti-Federalist, or republicans. Jefferson only lasted six years as Secretary of State, resigning in 1793 to return the bucolic life of Monticello.

## **The Odd Couple at Odds**

### **Jay’s Treaty**

Chief Justice John Jay, at the direction of Washington, had negotiated a realistic bargain with the English that avoided war with England at a time when the United States was ill-prepared to fight one. Known as Jay’s Treaty, it recognized English naval and commercial supremacy and implicitly endorsed a pro-English version of American neutrality, giving England the right to retain tariffs on American exports, accepting for practicable purposes English impressments of American sailors and committing the United States to compensate English creditors for outstanding pre-revolutionary debts. In return for these concessions, the English agreed to submit claims by American merchants for confiscated cargo to arbitration and to abide by the promise made in the Treaty of Paris to evacuate troops from their posts on the Western fronts. In effect, Jay’s Treaty to many was a repudiation of the France’s alliance with the United States of 1778 that had been so instrumental in gaining French military assistance in the American Revolution.

Jay’s Treaty brought heated debate with Adams and Jefferson taking opposite sides, all of which gnawed at the rapport between the odd couple. It was symbolic of America’s struggle for

its destiny. Jefferson was appalled by the treaty; he never could accept it, regarding its principles as a repudiation of the American principles of its revolution. Adams had quite a different view, recognizing that it was a sound compromise with England that would ensure American neutrality and avoid a war with England. The Federalists viewed Jay's Treaty as an exercise of strong executive leadership; Jefferson and his fellow Republicans saw it as an arbitrary maneuvering of a monarch, a betrayal of the American Revolution. This difference of opinion about Jay's Treaty epitomized the difference between Adams and Jefferson's philosophies of government born in a revolution. Jefferson saw the American Revolution in global terms. Our revolution was an opening shot against tyranny everywhere and would spawn rebellion against despots and any monarchs or legislatures that were disobedient to the rights of mankind.

As an example, in contrast to Adams view of the increasing savagery of the French Revolution, Jefferson saw the French Revolution as the European continuation of the spirit of 1776. While the violence of the French rebellion was lamentable, Jefferson saw it as only a passing chapter in the larger story of triumph of global revolution. He stated, "I am convinced the French will triumph completely, the consequential disgrace of invading tyrants is destined, in the order of events, to kindle the wrath of the people of Europe against those who have dared to embroil them in such wickedness, and to bring at length Kings, nobles and priests to the scaffolds which they have been so long deluging with blood." In contrast to his view of the French struggle for liberty, Jefferson was convinced that England was an inherently corrupt society, the bastion of monarchical power, and aristocratic privilege.

Adams (and Washington) believed that strong executive leadership was critically important in our infant years of our nation, requiring our country to maneuver back and forth between competing foreign governments in order to maintain and preserve a policy of neutrality.

After the Revolution, they saw the role of the executive and the congress to keep the nation afloat, and they believed our foreign policy must be focused on the preservation of our union. These differing views of where liberty should travel inevitably set Adams and Jefferson on a political treadmill, with Jefferson traveling in one direction and Adams in the other. This was a treadmill that came crashing off its foundation in the presidential election of 1796

When Washington announced that he would not seek a third term, there were two obvious candidates to succeed Washington: the odd couple. They both were legendary figures in 1796. They had impeccable Revolutionary credentials. Historians have commented that the Adams-Jefferson tandem stood out as the greatest collaboration in the American's colonial period; choosing between them was like choosing between the head and the heart of the American Revolution. But choose between them the electors to the Electoral College had to do. While both Jefferson and Adams proclaimed that their friendship continued without the slightest interruption, Jefferson interpreted Adams's writings as endorsing an American monarchy, with the President as King. These suggestions outraged Adams exhorting to all who would listen that Jefferson knew well that he would never confer to a monarchy.

Both Adams and Jefferson were candidates for president who did not openly profess to be candidates. It was then politically incorrect to openly campaign for the office. James Madison was quietly orchestrating the Republican campaign on behalf of Jefferson and was his grand strategist. Adams' campaign was being plotted by Abigail whose political insights and acuity were every bit as good as Madison's. America's first political campaign also revealed a tendency that has been carried on uninterrupted to this day, mudslinging-negative campaigning. Adams was denounced as a monarchist who wanted to call the President, His Majesty. Federalist editors countered with anti-Jefferson propaganda including accusations of cowardice when he fled from

the British troops in the American Revolution and allegations that he was an intellectual dreamer, “more fit to be a professor in college, president of a philosophical society, but not a person to be the chief magistrate of a great nation.” While the mud was being slung, both Adams and Jefferson pretended to be above the political fray and uninvolved in political intrigue.

The electoral votes split along sectional lines. Adams carried New England; Jefferson carried the South. Adams followed the counting of the electoral votes carefully. Jefferson’s posture throughout the electoral vote counting was a combination of studied indifference and calculated obliviousness. Madison relayed state by state assessments to Jefferson, who was in Monticello and he predicted two months before it became official that Adams would win by 3 electoral votes, the precise result.

In December, 1796, Jefferson wrote a congratulatory letter to Adams in which he regretted that “the various little incidents that have happened or been contrived to separate us.” He squelched any rumors that he might resent serving under his old friend as Vice-President: “I can particularly have no feelings which would revolt at a secondary position to Mr. Adams. I am his junior in life, was his junior in Congress, his junior in the diplomatic line, his junior lately in our civil government.” Abigail trusted Jefferson. “My friendship for that gentleman has lived through faults and errors, to which I have been blind. I believe he remains our friend.”

Early in Adams’ administration, it became clear that Jefferson could not work with Adams because of their different views of government, the relationship between the states and Congress, and foreign and domestic policy.

At the outset of his administration, Adams’ strategy was to bring Jefferson into his confidence and councils and to create a bi-partisan administration, where Jefferson would enjoy access and influence. He wanted to recover the old collaboration of 1776. He trusted Jefferson

more than some of his Federalist friends because of Jefferson's good revolutionary credentials. In a letter to Elbridge Gary, he said of Jefferson, "His talents I know well and have ever believed in his honor, integrity, his love of country, and his friends.

Yet their political divisions just ran too deep, and where trust was critical, it soon began to evanesce. Early, Jefferson sent to Madison a draft of a letter to Jefferson in which he indicated that he would be pleased and honored to play a constructive role in Adams' administration. Madison advised Jefferson against sending such a letter to Adams. He considered it would be very awkward for Jefferson to work with Adams because of a friendship, when their political differences were so great. Jefferson followed Madison's advice and chose loyalty to the Republican Party over loyalty to Adams. Immediately after his swearing in as Vice-President, Jefferson hit the road back to Monticello in effect, setting up a republican government in exile.

Adams retained Washington's advisors, mostly Federalists, which most historians considered a big mistake. These were men who were loyal to Alexander Hamilton, and without Jefferson's friendship, Adams was left with Abigail as his only trusted advisor and politically isolated.

Adams' administration was headed on a road to disaster. A supercharged political atmosphere was developing between the Federalists and the Republicans; and his Vice-President was, in fact, the leader of the opposition. His cabinet was loyal to the memory of Washington. Alexander Hamilton was working within the party to undermine Adams' leadership. Adams did not stand much chance to succeed, and Jefferson was waiting in the wings to take his place.

Several events that occurred during Adams' administration were symbolic of the separation of the odd couple. What became known as the XYZ Affair brought disdain to

Jefferson and praises to Adams. Adams had sent a delegation to France to negotiate a Peace Treaty. But France's foreign minister, Tallyrand, had refused to receive the American delegation and sent three of his operatives to demand a bribe of 50,000 pounds. The bribe was rejected, and when the news of the attempted bribe finally reached the public, reaction was unfavorable to Jefferson. Editorials in the *Porcupines Gazette* vilified Jefferson, describing him as the Frenchified faction in this country and a leading member of the American Directory. A popular Fourth of July toast was, "John Adams, may he, like Sampson, slay thousands of Frenchman with the jawbone of Jefferson."

The Alien & Sedition Acts added more fuel to the fire. These Acts were designed to deport and disenfranchise foreign-born residents, mostly Frenchmen, who had been disposed to support the Republican party, making it a crime to publish any false, scandalous, or malicious writings about the government of the United States. While Adams professed that he signed the laws begrudging and reluctantly because of pressure from the Federalists, he was vilified for it, and Jefferson was aghast that Adams would even appear to support such an act designed to subvert a basic and natural rights of American citizens. And Jefferson saw it as an attack on him personally.

As Adams continued to struggle with his administration, the Republicans under Jefferson closed ranks and looked on Adams' crisis of leadership as opportunities to undermine the Federalist Party, regarded by Jefferson as an organized conspiracy against the true meaning of the Revolution. Political events were working to Jefferson's advantage. There were serious issues within the Federalist party over an attempt to negotiate a peace treaty with the French; there was a palpable division within the Federalist camp between the devotees to Hamiltonians and supporters of Adams. The passage of the Alien and Sedition Acts was a political blunder

(although Abigail endorsed it wholeheartedly). In response, Jefferson and Madison authorized the Kentucky and Virginia Resolutions. Their argument was that the Alien and Sedition Acts were unconstitutional because they violated the natural rights of citizens of each state to control their own domestic affairs. The essence of these resolutions was that each state had the right to nullify federal laws the state deemed unconstitutional. They bred the seed of the right of a state to secede from the union.

There was a fear that the creation of an army, wholeheartedly supported by Adams, under the firm grip of Hamilton, might march on the south. Jefferson saw our country on the verge of a civil war.

To add fuel to the political flame, in 1798, Jefferson secretly commissioned a scalawag, James Callendar, to write a libelous attack on Adams. In a pamphlet, Callendar described Adams as a “hoary-headed incendiary who was equally determined on war with France and declaring himself President for life with John Quincy lurking in the background as his successor.” Adams was outraged; so was Abigail. She never forgot it.

Adams lost the 1800 election to the team of Jefferson and Burr. Jefferson proved to be the ultimate politician during the campaign. Having been a staunch supporter of the French Revolution, once Napoleon established himself as a military dictator, Jefferson quickly shifted his position to accommodate this turn of events. He said, “It is very material for the American people to be made sensible that their own character and situation are materially different from the French and that whatever may be the fate of Republicanism there, we are able to preserve it here.” Ironically, this was precisely the neutral foreign policy both Washington and Adams had been urging for a decade and that Jefferson had condemned as a betrayal of the Spirit of 1776.

During the election, Hamilton wrote a diatribe attacking the character of Adams. He described him as an inherently unstable creature, a man driven by vanity, and his own perverse version of independence, a pathetic bundle of twitches and tantrums who was unfit for the office of Chief Magistrate. Adams response was that his statement would do him more harm than good. (It turned out that Adams was right about this).

Jefferson, together in collaboration with Madison, not only captured the Federal government for the Republicans in 1800, but they also sank Federalism into abyss from where there was no resurrection, as Jefferson so graphically put it. Republicans were now in control of Congress, and the Federalists were now in disarray. It was the revolution of 1800 where the Republicans ascended to power and Federalists began to disappear from the political scene. Adams and Washington's view of government was now defeated, and the Jefferson and Madison collaboration became the politics of the future. What died was the presumption, so essential to Adams sense of politics, that there was a long term collective interest for the Republic that could be divorced from partisanship. Now, no political leader could claim to be above any political fray. Jefferson understood this from the moment Washington stepped down, and the American President was henceforth the head of his political party.

Despite all the bitterness between the odd couple over the four years of Adams' presidency and all the many wounds inflicted, one upon the other, Abigail insisted that her husband invite "their former friend," for cake and tea before they departed to Quincy, a few weeks before Jefferson's inauguration. There is no record of the conversations between the Adamses and Jeffersons, but it was thought to be accommodating and polite. On the day of Jefferson's inauguration, Adams was not by his side. Adams had taken the 4 o'clock stage out of

Washington that morning in order to rejoin Abigail. The odd couple did not exchange another word for another 12 years.

## **Reconciliation**

The seeds of reconciliation of the odd couple was sown by Benjamin Rush, the noted Philadelphia physician and signer of the Declaration of Independence. Rush recounted to Adams that he had a dream where Adams took the initiative to communicate with Jefferson, breaking the long silence between them. Some 15 months later in a letter to Jefferson, Rush urged Jefferson to revive his correspondence with his old friend. Rush said about Adams “Tottering over the grave, he now leans wholly upon the shoulders of his old revolutionary friends.” Jefferson was reluctant to renew their friendship, particularly because he had been severely rebuffed in a letter from Abigail in correspondence between them after the death of Jefferson’s daughter, Maria. Abigail was still furious with Jefferson over the slanderous allegations made against Adams during the campaign of 1800, and in a reply letter to Jefferson, she had accused him of “the blackest calumny and foulest falsehoods.”

In 1811, during a visit from John Edward Coles of Albemarle County, Adams said to Coles, “I always loved Jefferson and still love him.” This got back to Jefferson, and Jefferson let it be known that he would welcome correspondence from Adams.

With a recovered sense of common affection, Adams proclaimed that they (the odd couple) ought not to die before they explained themselves to each other. On New Year’s Day of his 77<sup>th</sup> year, Adams reopened the dialogue with Jefferson, and spawned an exchange of 158 letters that enriched the lives of both Adams and Jefferson, and made a historical record that is

generally regarded as the intellectual capstone to the achievements of the American Revolution and the most important correspondence between prominent statesmen.

It would take another paper to recount the richness and fullness of this exchange of letters between Jefferson and Adams. These letters can be read as an exchange of conversation between the Gods of Mount Olympus. They talked about many subjects: art, science, agriculture, the nature of man, politics, and their different views of the American Revolution and the Constitution. At the outset, they brought each other up-to-date about their health, their physical activities. In one of Jefferson's first letters, he lamented that so few of the signers of the Declaration of Independence were left.

Adams made it clear early in the correspondence that he had not agreed with many of Jefferson and Madison's policies. Most historians say that Adams was jealous of Jefferson's popularity, and Adams viewed the correspondence between them as a way to vindicate his view about the Revolution. Adams recognized the right to their different opinions and judgments, but Adams was confident that history would agree with many of his objections to Jefferson's action, such as the repeal of the Judiciary Act that was spawned by Adams' appointment of the midnight judges which led to the greatest case in American jurisprudence, *Marbury v. Madison*.

Interestingly, Adams told Jefferson he shared some responsibility for the passage of the Alien & Sedition Acts since he had signed the measure as Vice-President – touché.

Adams felt that while he was no foe to learning and inquiry, he held to the view that their was nothing new under the sun. This view differed dramatically from Jefferson's views of the progress of mankind and science and the expansion of human knowledge, and his belief in the improvability of the human mind and the limitless progress of human knowledge.

They discussed their differences on the issues of the relative strength of the branches of government and the role of the elites in leading and governing the American republic. They recounted their differing view of the French Revolution. They both anticipated a sectional crisis between the North and South that appeared to loom in the future, but they avoided discussing the issue of slavery, except for an exchange about the Missouri compromise that involved the question of extension of slavery into the territories. Jefferson understood that the constitutional question over federal jurisdiction over states' rights masked a deeper issue – the future of slavery. He wrote to Adams, “The real question, as seen in the states afflicted with this unfortunate population, is Are our slaves to be presented with freedom and a dagger? For if Congress has a power to regulate the conditions of the inhabitants of states, within the states, it will be but another exercise of that power to declare that all shall be free. Are we then to . . . wage another Peloponnesian War to settle the ascendancy between them. That question remains to be seen: but not I hope by you or me. Surely they will parlay awhile, and give us time to get out of the way.

In 1818, Adams lost his beloved Abigail. Jefferson wrote a touching letter to a bereaved Adams. He told Adams that he was well aware of his suffering. He had learned that time and silence were the only medicines for immeasurable ills, and Adams could take comfort from the thought of an afterlife and their ecstatic meeting with those whom they had loved and lost and would never lose again. This is one of only a few times that Jefferson expressed his thoughts on an afterlife.

In summary, their letters were eloquent soliloquies of all the timeless topics speaking across their political differences to each other and the ages to us.

Jefferson's last letter was delivered to Adams by his grandson, Jeff Randolph. Adams took great pleasure in meeting Jefferson's grandson and was impressed with his manner and stature.

Adams and Jefferson both died on July 4, 1826, a remarkable providential coincidence. Jefferson was determined to live to the 4th of July, 1826, the 50<sup>th</sup> year anniversary of the Declaration.

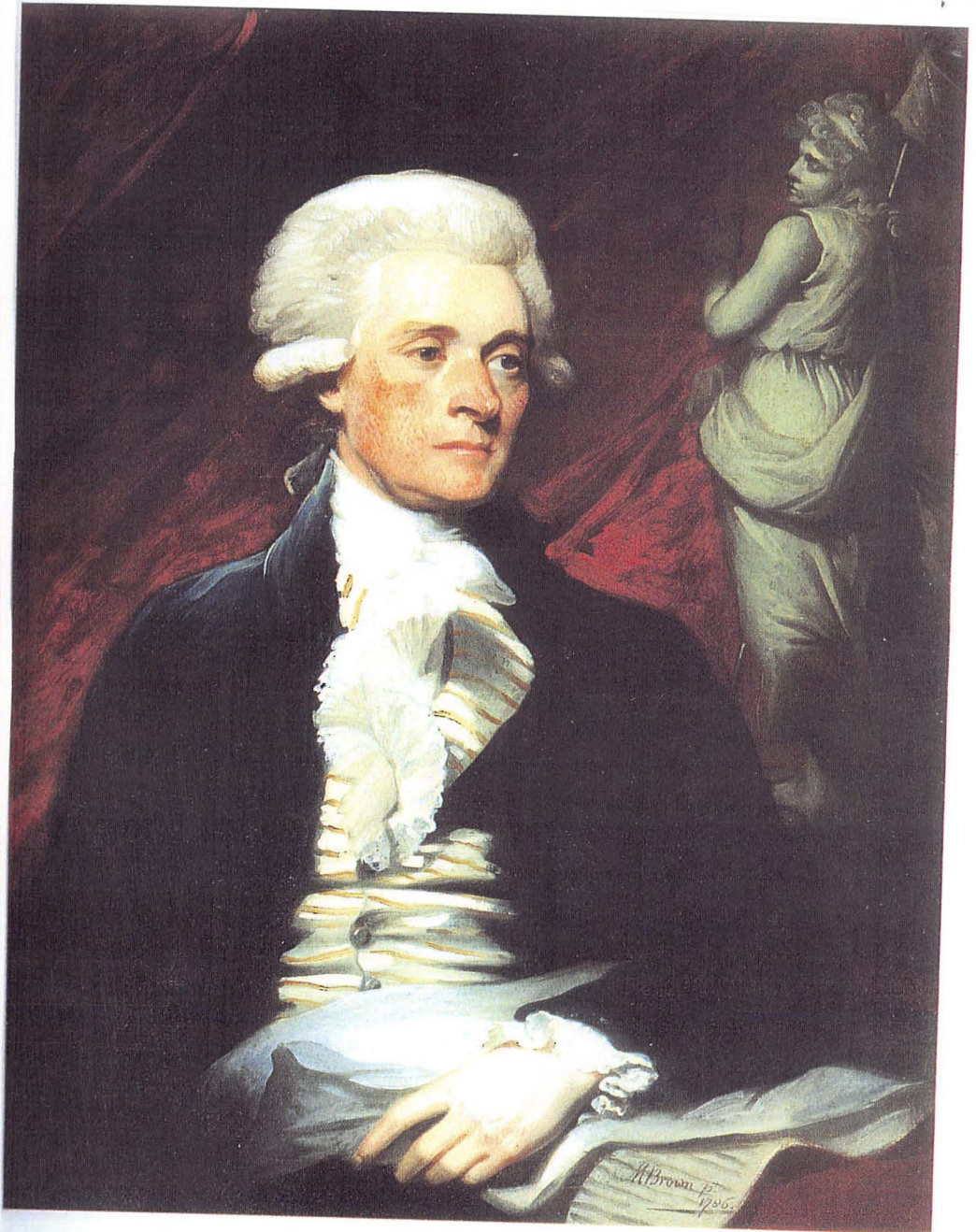
Adams' last words were, "Thomas Jefferson still survives." The coincidence of the death of the odd couple on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the Republic electrified the people of our nation. Adams' son, John Quincy, saw the hand of God in it.

As points of discussion, it might be interesting to debate how the odd couple would view the American experiment with democracy. How would they have sided on succession and the civil war? Would they have been isolationists prior to our entry into WWI? Would Jefferson have been a republican and Adams a democrat? Would they be overwhelmed with the size of our budget, our deficits, our military power, our entangling alliances, our social security system, our political scandals, or would they concur that human nature has not changed much over the last 200 years of the American experience as man has made progress in science and technology while at the same time understanding that the demand on government has increased. While undoubtedly they would have continued to express their opinions, our odd couple may have found that their divergent views of the meaning of the great American Revolution had come full circle into one of harmony and accord or perhaps they would not have been able to reconcile their strong views of politics and the nature of man, and our uncle would have remained the odd couple.

## Our Uncles - The Odd Couple



In London, at the height of their friendship, John Adams and Thomas Jefferson each sat for the young American painter Mather Brown. The Adams portrait was done in 1785, that of Jefferson the year after.



This of Jefferson, however, is a copy by Brown of the original, which later disappeared. It is the first known portrait of Jefferson and, unlike all others, shows him looking very like a European dandy.