



John Adams and the Spirit of Liberty

Written by C. Bradley Thompson

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John Adams and the Spirit of Liberty

By C. Bradley Thompson

John Adams And Thomas Jefferson

America's finest eighteenth-century student of political science, John Adams is also the least studied of the Revolution's key figures. By the time he became our second president, no American had written more about our government and not even Jefferson or Madison had read as widely about questions of human nature, natural right, political organization, and constitutional construction. Yet this staunch constitutionalist is perceived by many as having become reactionary in his later years and his ideas have been largely disregarded.

John Adams And Alexander Hamilton

In the first major work on Adams's political thought in over thirty years, C. Bradley Thompson takes issue with the notion that Adams's thought is irrelevant to the development of American ideas. Focusing on Adams's major writings, Thompson elucidates and reevaluates his political and constitutional thought by interpreting it within the tradition of political philosophy stretching from Plato to Montesquieu.

John Adams And King George Iii

This major revisionist study shows that the distinction Adams drew between "principles of liberty" and "principles of political architecture" is central to his entire political philosophy. Thompson first chronicles Adams's conceptualization of moral and political liberty during his confrontation with American Loyalists and British imperial officers over the true nature of justice and the British Constitution, illuminating Adams's two most important pre-Revolutionary essays, "A Dissertation on the Canon and Feudal Law" and "The Letters of Novanglus." He then presents Adams's debate with French philosophers over the best form of government and provides an extended analysis of his *Defense of the Constitutions of Government* and *Discourses on Davila* to demonstrate his theory of political architecture.

John Adams And Thomas Jefferson Death

From these pages emerges a new John Adams. In reexamining his political thought, Thompson reconstructs the contours and influences of Adams's mental universe, the ideas he challenged, the problems he considered central to constitution-making, and the methods of his reasoning. Skillfully blending history and political science, Thompson's work shows how the spirit of liberty animated Adams's life and reestablishes this forgotten Revolutionary as an independent and important thinker.

Absolutely fascinating study, providing surprising insights into the structure of our government, and its enduring strength.

The key innovation in Adams' political thought concerned political architecture -- he created a structure that interweaves two tripartite separations: the modern liberal (Locke, Montesquieu) conception of the separation of powers (legislative, executive, judicial) and the classical and Renaissance republican (Plato, Aristotle, Polybius, Machiavelli) conception of the one, the few, and the many. Absolutely fascinating study, providing surprising insights into the structure of our government, and its enduring strength.

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These two triple balances interfold within each other. The way this works is that the legislative power is divided among a bicameral legislature (House, Senate) as well as the executive, who is given a legislative veto. (Therefore the separation of powers is not absolute -- the executive also has a legislative function.) In this way, the legislative power is divided among the many (House), the few (Senate), and the one (executive).

Everyone knows about the balance of powers, but no one talks about this other balance in government. The philosophical justification for it is that there is a naturally occurring distinction between the many and the few of extraordinary talents -- the natural aristocracy. That Adams' foremost goal was to _protect_ the nation from the schemes of the natural aristocracy, and for this reason "ostracized" them to a Senate, so that could then be counterbalanced by the House and the executive, did not help his case. Something in the belief in a natural aristocracy goes against the American grain -- yet it is one codified in the structure of our government.

Adams drafted the Massachusetts Constitution with this structure, and the federal Constitution later followed it. The "secret" of our government structure is that the Senate is an aristocratic body -- intended to use the gifts of the natural aristocracy, but also to confine them, and protect the majority from them.

The structure of our government actually represents three orders -- the many, the few (aristocracy), and the one (president). All three are popularly elected. Adams would probably say this is the most democratic system possible, in that it is the most representative. All the people vote, and all the people (many, few, and one) are represented.

Adams witnessed his theories in action, not only in America but in France. A major purpose of his *_Defense_* and *_Davila_* was to warn France against adopting a pure democracy -- a single unified democratic legislature. Adams foresaw the bloodshed of the French Revolution years before Burke. He may have been the first to have seen it coming. Just as he predicted, mob rule led to mass violence, the rise of competing aristocracies, and the final ascension of a dictator (Napoleon). This is the kind of cycle that non-mixed governments are subject to, and the bloodshed was ultimately due to the *_structure_* of government. If the French reformers had followed a triple balance in the legislature -- including an "upper house" -- the French Revolution could have occurred, without the Reign of Terror.

Jefferson and Madison also discussed the purpose of the legislative Senate as being aristocratic in nature (see the passage on Jefferson's Notes on Virginia; on Madison see Ellenbogen, "Another Explanation for the Senate.") Nevertheless, Adams was reviled as being pro-monarchy and pro-aristocracy. There was perhaps some truth to this, but not nearly as much as was said. Jefferson deserves acclaim for his steadfast determination to the uniquely *_American_* experiment, that is, in keeping the country from moving towards having either a king or hereditary aristocracy. But even if Adams was more appreciative of these forms of government (as in England), he rejected them for his own country, and certainly never tried to implement them. (Hamilton, on the other hand, did advocate a king for America at the Constitutional Convention.)

We may well owe to Adams the original inspiration for the structure of our government (drawing on the colonial charters, the British Constitution, and his vast knowledge of history and political science). Very likely this structure has been the key to our success. ...more

John Adams And King George

This book about Adams' political scholarship taught me that Adams was more intellectually accomplished and more instrumental in creating the United States Constitution than he has been given credit for. I also learned that the widely held belief that he, after the revolution, advocated monarchy and aristocracy is a false notion treacherously perpetuated by his partisan political detractors and is disproven by his written works. Reading this work bumped him to the top of my list of favorite Found

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The definitive book on understanding John Adams as a political theorist.

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