

Toward A Conservative Liberalism: John Quincy Adams, Slavery, and the Meaning of Freedom

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Scholars who argue America is an essentially liberal nation tend to have only one variety of liberalism in mind: Lockean liberalism. This strand of liberalism is fully committed to what Isaiah Berlin calls negative liberty, the result of leaving citizens free from political or social constraints and allowing them to flourish on their own. However, the politics and life of John Quincy Adams stand in stark contrast to Lockean liberalism. Adams was a self-proclaimed liberal who argued freedom was the aim of all legitimate governments, but he understood that term in a strictly positive way. Informed by Christian and classical sources, Adams argues that liberty goes beyond a lack of political restraint; it requires the cultivation of personal virtue that allows one to curb their selfish instincts. This article will examine Adams's political writings to understand this unique form of conservative liberalism, before turning to the writings of American abolitionists who borrowed heavily from Adams's ideas, revealing their broader popularity.

“A Roman soul is bent on higher views: To civilize the rude, unpolished world, and lay it under the restraint of laws; To make man mild, and sociable to man; To cultivate the wild, licentious savage with wisdom, discipline, and liberal arts - The embellishments of life; virtues like these make human nature shine, reform the soul, and break our fierce barbarians into men.” —Joseph Addison, *Cato: A Tragedy*, Act I Scene 4

At least since the publication of Louis Hartz's *The Liberal Tradition in America* in 1955, American political scientists have tended to understand America as an exclusivity liberal nation.¹ Thus, American politics is simply the unfolding of liberalism as it smooths out its

¹ Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America: An Interpretation of American Political Thought Since the Revolution* (New York: A Harvest/HBJ Book, 1955) is one of the most seminal of these works, though there are many others. See Theodore J. Lowi, *The End of Liberalism* (New York: Norton, 1979); Thomas G. West, *The Political Theory of the American Founding: Natural Rights, Public Policy, and the Moral Conditions of Freedom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Michael P. Zuckert, *The Natural Rights Republic: Studies in the Foundation of the American Political Tradition* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010).

rough edges.² However, what sort of liberalism is it these scholars describe as fundamentally American? Recent research has consistently shown that liberalism is not a single monolithic approach to understanding politics, but rather a diverse tradition capable of accommodating a vast array of viewpoints.³ At its core, liberalism is “a commitment to individual liberty and the governmental institutions that serve it.”⁴ The question that arises and differentiates the various strains of liberalism is how one defines the key term—freedom—and how one thinks such freedom is best protected by the government. Scholars who argue America is an essentially liberal nation tend to have only one variety of liberalism in mind: Lockean (or libertarian) liberalism.⁵ This strand of liberalism is fully committed to what Isaiah Berlin calls negative liberty, the result of leaving citizens free from political or social constraint and allowing them to flourish on their own.⁶

What this scholarship tends to miss is that there is another liberal strain in American political thought: conservative liberalism.⁷ Though rejected as a fundamentally illiberal concept, a great many self-proclaimed liberals throughout history have embraced a positive

² Though many have criticized this theory, the exclusively liberal account of America has displayed incredible longevity and continued popularity. For works that criticize the liberal thesis, see Rogers M. Smith, *Civic Ideals: Conflicting Visions of Citizenship in U.S. History* (New Haven, Ct: Yale University Press, 1999), Bernard Bailyn, *Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Belknap Press, 2017), Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991), Matthew Mason, “Necessary but Not Sufficient: Revolutionary Ideology and Antislavery Action in the Early Republic,” in *Contesting Slavery: The Politics of Bondage and Freedom in the New American Nation*, eds. John Craig Hammond and Matthew Mason (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2011), James W. Ceaser, *Nature and History in American Political Development* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), James A. Morone, *Hellfire Nation: The Politics of Sin in American History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004).

³ On the ways liberalism can take on different forms, see Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The Road To Modernity: The British, French, and American Enlightenments* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 2004) and J. David Greenstone, *The Lincoln Persuasion: Remaking American Liberalism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014).

⁴ John M. Owen and Richard N. Rosecrance, *International Politics: How History Modifies Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 4.

⁵ Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America*, 15. Duncan Bell and other Cambridge School Theorists have shown that it is problematic to consider John Locke a liberal because he never used the term to refer to himself. Still, the scholars who continually posit America’s pervasive liberalism consider Locke a liberal. It is their view of Lockean liberalism that I shall refer to throughout the paper, though the term individualist liberalism perhaps better captures the spirit of this view. See Duncan Bell, “What Is Liberalism?,” *Political Theory* 42, no. 6 (July 2014): 682–715.

⁶ Sir Isaiah Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 118–72.

⁷ In one of the sharpest criticisms of the liberal thesis, Rogers Smith, “Beyond Tocqueville, Myrdal, and Hartz: The Multiple Traditions in America,” *American Political Science Review* 87, no. 3 (1993): 549–66, argues that while America has a strong liberal tradition it also has strong republican and ascriptive traditions as well. The ascriptive tradition emerged as a way for Americans to oppress racial and gender minorities in order “to believe that their social roles and personal characteristics express an identity that has inherent and transcendent worth.” However, recent scholarship, such as that by Jean Marc Pruitt, “Black Atlantic Republicans and the Limits of the Plantation,” *Journal of Hattian Studies* 28, iss. 1 (Spring 2022): 39–59, has shown that the republican and ascriptive traditions are so closely linked that they are not clearly separable.

definition of freedom.⁸ Positive liberty is the idea that one is only truly free if they have gained self-mastery over themselves.⁹ The first great expositor of this conservative liberalism in the United States was John Quincy Adams. Pulling from Christian and classical sources, Adams argues that liberty goes beyond a lack of political restraint. In his eyes, freedom requires the cultivation of personal virtue that allows one to curb their selfish instincts. In making this argument, Adams articulated a different account of liberalism, one that places greater emphasis on community and virtue than its Lockean counterpart.¹⁰ This conservative liberalism did not exist alone in the heart of one man, but Adams was both the strongest and one of the first originators of this understudied strain of liberalism in the United States. This article will first examine the political writings of John Quincy Adams to understand this unique form of liberalism. It will then survey the writings of prominent abolitionists to show that Adams's understanding of liberalism was broadly popular and had a political impact. In so doing, it hopes to show that however prominent Lockean liberalism may be, it does not exist alone in the American political tradition.

WHAT IS LOCKEAN LIBERALISM?

Though investigating the precise meaning and exploring the long tradition of Lockean liberalism stands outside the scope of this article, it is important to understand the major tenets of this ideology to fully appreciate its stark differences from conservative liberalism. Likewise, combing through the pages of the great English sage himself would widen the scope of the article beyond what is feasible. To that end, the understanding of Locke offered here is derived not from the thinker himself but from contemporary scholars who have used his thought in an attempt articulate the broad contours of Lockean liberalism. The political theorist Leo Strauss has described the central thinking of Lockean liberalism succinctly: "If virtue by itself is ineffectual [in sustaining a healthy regime], civil society must have a

⁸ Other notable liberals who support a positive conception of liberty and conservative liberalism include Yuval Levin, *The Great Debate: Edmund Burke, Thomas Paine, and the Birth of Right and Left* (New York: Basic Books, 2014) and Pierre Manent, *Tocqueville and the Nature of Democracy* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996).

⁹ Positive liberty so often accompanies conservative liberalism because—as Benjamin Constant has famously observed—it is the sort of freedom that defined the ancient world, in contrast to a more modern emphasis on negative liberty.

¹⁰ Helena Rosenblatt explores this positive liberalism in *The Lost History of Liberalism: From Ancient Rome to the Twenty-First Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018); however, she argues that it was new to the United States in the mid-nineteenth century. A study of John Quincy Adams shows that this is not the case.

foundation other than human perfection or the inclination towards it; it must be based on the strongest desire in man, the desire for self-preservation.”¹¹ In short, Lockean liberalism assumes man’s natural selfishness; unlike ancient republics it does not seek to correct selfishness but instead attempts to work around it.¹² Scholars such as Hartz use this theory to understand the fundamental character of the American regime: they argue that the United States’ liberal nature inextricably links it to the capitalist system that uses human greed to drive economic progress.¹³ These scholars also channel the instinct of self-interest, rather than discourage it, in the very nature of the checks-and-balances system itself, which, in Madison’s phrase, is designed to force ambition to counteract ambition.¹⁴

Lockean liberalism’s more practical claims—its ardent support for negative over positive liberty, its belief in the individual as the root of society, and its understanding of natural rights—stem from this foundational claim about self-interest. If humans cannot be improved upon, or it is at least not the government’s business to do so, it logically follows that negative liberty is the sort of freedom that a liberal regime should be oriented to. From this view, academics who understand America in exclusively liberal terms argue that the United States’ commitment to negative liberty forms the very heart of the regime. Patrick Deneen, in his recent critique of America’s liberal ethos, claims that it is liberalism’s insistence that liberty is “the condition in which one can act freely within the private sphere unconstrained by positive law” that sets it apart from all previous ages and the traditions that governed them.¹⁵ Many other scholars have used this view of liberalism to show why Americans are squeamish about direct government intervention in their lives.¹⁶

Lockean Liberalism’s understanding of natural rights and individualism are strongly linked. Natural rights in Lockean liberalism rest upon the self-interest of citizens. As Michael Zuckert has argued, “What derives from nature are the selfish passions, which in themselves

¹¹ Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1965), 212.

¹² It should be noted that many scholars, though not all, have made clear that this is not because Lockean liberalism believes virtue unimportant but because it holds that it is impossible to reliably sustain a virtuous society. Thus Lockean liberalism is meant to be pragmatic and not viciously selfish in outlook.

¹³ Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America*, 17–18.

¹⁴ Herbert J. Storing and Joseph M. Bessette, *Toward a More Perfect Union: Writings of Herbert J. Storing* (Washington, D.C: AEI Press, 1995), 68; James Madison, *Federalist*, No. 51.

¹⁵ Patrick J. Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018), 37.

¹⁶ See James A. Morone, *The Democratic Wish: Popular Participation and the Limits of American Government* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998) and Stephen Skowronek, *Building A New American State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

produce only selfish claims, not yet full rights; what transforms the claims of the passions into rights is the ‘civilized’ figuring out of the system of mutual respect for rights.”¹⁷ In short, to the Lockean liberal, a system of rights is created so that we understand it is in our own interest to treat others well. There is no appeal to a higher power or better nature. Scholars of Lockean liberalism argue that individual humans enter into government and many societal institutions for the self-interested protection of these rights. Man begins first and foremost as an individual and joins his fellows out of self-interest and a need to maintain that individuality.

Conservative liberals reject much of this. They acknowledge man’s selfish nature but deny that selfishness alone can serve as the foundation of a well-functioning political system. Instead, they hold that positive liberty is the only way to cultivate a free society and that natural rights must be grounded in the innate bonds that link humans together. Such a view seems like a harsh break with liberalism to those who consider Locke the fountain of all liberal ideas. But this is not the case, as conservative liberalism accepts the same fundamental reality as its Lockean counterpart: government cannot rule absolutely on the nature of morality and thus it is the job of the state to secure freedom for the individual. However, conservative liberals reject on both moral and practical grounds the Lockean belief that selfishness alone can serve as the foundation of a well-functioning political system. To borrow a phrase from Daniel Patrick Moynihan, a notable twentieth-century conservative liberal, “the ‘science of politics’ can make the demands of virtue bearable but can never substitute for them.”¹⁸ These political ideas do not exist in a vacuum. To truly understand conservative liberalism, we must turn to its first great American spokesman.¹⁹

THE REPUBLIC OF VIRTUE

John Quincy Adams flatly rejected the Lockean liberal conception of self-interest as the foundation of a healthy regime. He argued that the heart of any regime must be virtue.

¹⁷ Zuckert, *The Natural Rights Republic*, 76.

¹⁸ Daniel Patrick Moynihan, “The New Science of Politics and the Old Art of Government,” *The Public Interest* 86 (Winter 1987): 35.

¹⁹ At this juncture, it is not uncommon for those studying conservative liberalism to ask, “but is this not simply republicanism?” To be sure, conservative liberalism is similar to republicanism in its fondness for ancient political thought, belief in a communitarian social structure, and adherence to often more hierarchal forms of government. However, conservative liberalism is still demonstrably liberal in a way republicanism never is. For conservative liberals, community, tradition, locality, and etc. remain not the ends of politics but the means to human liberation. Nor do they understand this liberation in the truly republican sense of non-domination.

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Departing from the *Federalist's* emphasis on turning vices upon one another, Adams contended, "Virtue is the oxygen, the vital air of the moral world. Immutable and incorruptible itself."²⁰ Though monarchies, aristocracies, and dictatorships can survive without virtue, Adams contended that republics are different: they rely almost totally upon the character of public officials and private citizens alike.²¹ Without virtue, republics are doomed to sink into hopeless despotisms consumed by avarice and corruption. He argued that "the whole soul of every citizen of such a republic ... must be devoted to improve the condition of his country and of mankind; while liberty allows and stimulates him to the constant exercise of all the faculties of body and of mind, with which he has been endowed by his creator, to elevate, adorn, and beautify the land of his nativity, or of his choice."²²

To Adams, virtue meant striving for improvement in all aspects of life.²³ He believed that a human achieved virtue if they lived in accord with the fundamental teachings of Christianity: "That all mankind are of one blood, and the relation between them is that of brothers. That the rule of social intercourse between them is that each should do to all, as he would have done to him."²⁴ In short, Adams thought virtue to be selflessly living for others rather than oneself.²⁵ Adams had no illusions that perfection is easy or even possible. As he admitted, it is obviously true that the "human heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked."²⁶ But Adams also thought that "there is in man a spirit, and the inspiration of the almighty" that calls him to be better than his nature.²⁷ By this, he meant that every human has an

²⁰ John Quincy Adams, *Lectures on Rhetoric and Oratory: Delivered to the Classes of Senior and Junior Sophisters in Harvard University*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Hillard and Metcalf, 1810), 1:65.

²¹ Adams, *John Quincy Adams Diary: An Electronic Archive* (Boston, MA: Massachusetts Historical Society, 2023), September 26, 1786; March 12, 1795. Though he thought these other regimes could survive without virtue, he would also have argued that without virtue they could not help but be tyrannical.

²² Adams, "An Oration Delivered Before the Cincinnati Astronomical Society on the Laying of the Corner Stone of An Astronomical Observatory, on the 10th of November, 1843 (Cincinnati, OH: Shepard & Co., 1843), 15.

²³ Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 244, has called this "the painstaking regulation of all activities."

²⁴ Adams, "Introduction," in Joseph C. and Owen Lovejoy, *The Memoir of The Rev. Elijah P. Lovejoy; Who was Murdered in Defence of the Liberty of the Press, at Alton, Illinois, Nov. 7, 1837* (New York: John S. Taylor, 1838), 6.

²⁵ As Adams's intellectual inspiration Cicero put it in his master work, *De Officiis*, trans. Walter Miller (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1913), 23: "We are not born for ourselves alone, but our country claims a share of our being, and our friends a share." For this reason Adams placed a premium on public service. Rather than a grubby scrambling for power, the life of a politician was the selfless dedication to one's country and people.

²⁶ Adams, *John Quincy Adams Diary*, May 6, 1827.

²⁷ Adams, *John Quincy Adams Diary*, May 6, 1827. Adams's rejection of the Calvinist notion that man is so corrupted he is unredeemable departs from many of the Congregationalist ministers he otherwise deeply respected. In his Christian theology, Adams strongly believed that all humans, at their core, are loving. Humans should remove the layers of selfishness that are also part of their nature as best they can. He captured this view when discussing his understanding of Christ's introduction to the law of love, in *A Discourse on Education: A Lecture delivered at*

obligation to work to rise above his selfish instincts, and by pursuing this impossible quest approach goodness. As he summarized in a letter to his son George: “as I know that it is my nature to be imperfect, so I know that it is my duty to aim at perfection.”²⁸

Unlike many moral philosophers and evangelical ministers in his day, Adams argued that only a rare individual can improve their nature without the assistance of society and government. This view derives from his total rejection of an individualistic state of nature—a concept that serves as the very foundation of Lockean liberalism. Following in the footsteps of earlier thinkers such as Aristotle, he contended that man is “by the law of nature’s God, a social being. He cannot exist alone.”²⁹ For Adams man cannot live without society. Human beings need one another.³⁰ He conceded that “my character is (under the smiles of heaven) to be the work of my own hands,” but those hands must be guided with the assistance of one’s fellow man, else personal character inevitably descends into selfishness.³¹ Thus for Adams, “Society and government were not only natural but necessary safeguards of culture, relationships, and standards,” vital to cultivating the virtue necessary to living a free life.³²

Braintree, Thursday, Oct. 24, 1839 (Boston, MA: Perkins & Marvin, 1840), 15: “This simple and all-pervading principle was not in the Law of Moses. It was not in any preëxisting code of Laws ever imposed upon men. It was buried in the heart of man, blended and surrounded with ever selfish and sordid passion to which his fall from Paradise had surrendered him. But it was *there*, and Jesus who knew what was in man brought it forth, and proclaimed it was the transcend and paramount Law of man’s nature.”

²⁸ Adams to George Washington Adams, September 1811, *Letters From John Quincy Adams to His Son, On the Bible and Its Teachings* (Auburn, NY: James M. Alden, 1850), 11. He wrote to George on June 23, 1813, “Human excellence consists in approximation to perfection, and the only means of approaching to any term, is by endeavoring to obtain the term itself” (100). David Tucker, “John Quincy Adams on Principle and Practice,” in *History of American Political Thought*, eds. Bryan-Paul Frost and Jeffrey Sikkenga (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2019), 272–73, well summarizes this aspect of Adam’s thought: “Adams accepted the Judeo-Christian tenet that man was a created being who had freely chosen to violate God’s law, and who had thus separated himself from God and become fallen, frail, imperfect, and needy.... Man’s creator had compensated him, however, for this otherwise dire condition. Man could improve his condition through improving the arts (or technology as we would say) and his moral and political condition.”

²⁹ Adams, *The Social Compact Exemplified in the Constitution of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts; With Remarks on the Theories of Divine Right of Hobbes and of Filmer, and the Counter Theories of Sidney, Locke, Montesquieu, and Rousseau Concerning the Origin and Nature of Government* (Providence, RI: Knowles and Vose 1842), 12.

³⁰ George Arthur Lipsky, *John Quincy Adams: His Theory and Ideas* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1950), 146, eloquently captures this side of Adams’s political thought: “This human society or social order was not an artificial creation, nor was it created on the foundation of a rational decision made by men at a particular point in history or prehistory. Viewing life as inherently social, he found in man’s very simplest assertions the germs of a social order, and he thereby placed himself apart from typical eighteenth theorists of a state of nature that men transformed into a state of society by social compact.”

³¹ Adams, *John Quincy Adams Diary*, May 16, 1792; Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 244. As he aged Adams talked less about virtue being in his own hands and increasingly relied on God, his church, and his country to help him rise above his selfish nature.

³² Lipsky, *John Quincy Adams*, 89. Adams, in this sentiment that man is primarily a creature designed for virtue, rejects Locke’s notion that man is a creature primarily designed for material wellbeing. Adams explicitly rejects Locke’s

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Adams derived this perspective from his rejection of the Lockean view of social contract. In *The Social Compact*, Adams argued that families, rather than individuals, are the fundamental units of civil society that come together to form a government for the protection of their rights. “The union of the sexes, founded in the law of nature, necessarily precedes the social compact which constitutes the body politic, which is an association of families.”³³ Since man is a social creature, the idea of him existing outside of the family was ridiculous. Moreover, this conception of the family as society’s fundamental unit, when combined with religious belief, naturally leads to an emphasis on the importance of duty; it is impossible to conceive of human beings without obligations to one another. Citizens must take care of their fellow men and treat others as they wished to be treated or risk the collapse of the liberal project.³⁴ However, Adams made clear throughout his life that his emphasis on citizens’ reciprocal duties transcends what is merely advantageous for the individual citizen or even the regime. Departing definitively from many of his Lockean contemporaries, he insisted that duty had little to do with self-interest and more to do with the obligations placed upon humanity by God in exchange for redemption.³⁵ David Greenstone has summarized the centrality of duty to Adams better than anyone: “Adams believed that human beings, rather than doing just as they pleased in pursuit of whatever preferences they happened to have must be controlled by their duties as well as their rights, and thus by the moral law to which any conscientious person would gladly submit.”³⁶

Just as the family formed the foundation of the regime, Adams also thought that it served as a model for a properly arranged government. The purpose of a family is to take care of

notion, in the words of Pierre Manet, *An Intellectual History of Liberalism*, trans. Rebecca Balinski (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996), 42, that “Man is not naturally a political animal; he is an owning and laboring animal, owning because he is laboring, laboring in order to own.”

³³ Adams, *Social Compact*, 7. He clarified, “Democracy is not, and cannot be, the government merely of numbers. The social compact which constitutes a sovereign state is a compact not only of individuals, but of families. The people who form the Constitution and administer the government, are, and can be, only a portion of the people governed by it” (18). Adams’s social compact was not historical fact but a theory of human nature, grounded in biological and historical facts, that created a cohesive account of government. This view seems to offer a critique of other social contract theorists who seemingly ignored such details to create entirely abstract accounts of government’s origins.

³⁴ Adams, “Introduction,” *Memoir of The Rev. Elijah P. Lovejoy*. Lipsky, *John Quincy Adams*, 146: Adams “asserted that it was man’s duty to act through government for the improvement of his condition. Only thus might the rights of all be realized through the efforts of all.”

³⁵ Adams to George Washington Adams, September 1811. Though he did frankly admit that it is also usually in the self-interest of citizens to fulfill their duty to one another. In the words of Tucker, “John Quincy Adams on Principle and Practice,” 277, “if one is to enjoy his rights, he must respect the rights of others.”

³⁶ David Greenstone, *The Lincoln Persuasion: Remaking American Liberalism* (New Haven, CT: Princeton University Press, 1993), 200.

its members and to raise the children born into it to live a life of virtue. This mission imposes certain limits upon the father, who Adams considered the head of any properly arranged family.³⁷ He must tend to the needs of his wife and children and treat them justly. Though the father has absolute power over his offspring, he also has a duty to treat them well. Adams argued that government should function the same way.³⁸ Father and legislator alike are bound by “the eternal and immutable laws of justice” and though “the violation of those laws is certainly within” their power it is not within their rights.³⁹ From this Adams argues that not all governments are legitimate: those that shirk the duties they have to their citizens also forfeit the love of their citizens. In such cases, citizens are obliged to work to reform the regime under which they live, and in the most extreme cases, overthrow the government which tyrannically rules them.⁴⁰

VIRTUE AND FREEDOM

The conservative liberal belief that the cultivation of virtue is the best response to human selfishness, rather than the supposed Lockean solution of catering to vice, leads conservative liberals such as Adams to support a very different vision of liberty. In Adams’s early life, the definition of freedom embraced by most Americans undeniably emanated from the political thought of Locke. Thomas Jefferson and his followers presumed that man by nature had the

³⁷ Protecting the rights of the citizens was not a purely negative task for Adams. Though government must surely be restrained, it also had an obligation to empower individuals. See Tucker, “John Quincy Adams on Principle and Practice,” 278: “Adams recognized that a government must secure the rights of those who formed it, but he believed that the legitimate purpose of government extended beyond this.... Once men had a measure of security, they could attend to something more than defending themselves; they could consider the common welfare.”

³⁸ Adams, *Eulogy: On the Life and Character of James Monroe*, Fifth President of the United States. Delivered ... on the 25th of August, 1831 (Boston, MA: J.H. Eastburn, 1831), 28, firmly states, “That all exercise of organized power should be for the benefit of the people is the first maxim of government.”

³⁹ Adams, *Letters of Publicola*, “No. 2,” in *Writings of John Quincy Adams*, ed. Worthington Chauncey Ford, 7 vols. (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1913-17), 1:70; Lipsky, *John Quincy Adams*, 140, writes that government “was not in Adams’ opinion an unfriendly, immoral force to be kept at minimum. There was much that was dramatic and good, and even magnificent, that government should do, in fact, must do, if it was fulfill its purpose.” This was because Adams believed, in the words of Greg Russell, *John Quincy Adams and the Public Virtues of Diplomacy* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1995), 111, that the “the creator had made man a ‘sociable being’ had blended his happiness with that of his fellow man and government was a necessary instrumentality for the effectuating of this liaison.” Thus Adams departs strongly from figures like Thomas Paine who argue that government was at best a necessary evil. Adams, “Oration Delivered Before the Cincinnati Astronomical Society,” 15, stated the purpose of government: “The pursuit of happiness then, calls for the institution of governments, to regulate and adjust the collisions of interest and of passions, incident to the existence of civil society.”

⁴⁰ Adams, *Letters of Publicola*, “No. 2,” 72: “The people of England have, in common with other nations, a natural and unalienable right to form a constitution of Government, not because a whole nation has a right to do whatever he chooses to do, but because Government, being instituted for the common security of the natural rights of every individual, it must be liable to alterations whenever it becomes incompetent for that purpose.”

ability to order his life. For them, this was the basis of freedom and the essence of natural rights. The result was that man was freest when the government stepped aside and permitted him to live as he wished. Adams rejected this Lockean view of freedom; instead, he argued that freedom is the ability to live one's life well. For this sort of freedom to be possible, individuals must be free of external tyranny, but they must also cultivate self-restraint to free themselves from the tyranny of their own selfishness.

Throughout his career, Adams pointed to two events that he believed showed the nature of freedom and how society can work to free man from tyranny in all of its forms: the Protestant Reformation and the American Revolution. He argued that "in the theories of the crown and the miter, *man* had no rights. Neither the *body* nor the *soul* of the individual was his own."⁴¹ Though much more religiously open-minded than most Protestants at the time, Adams thought the Catholic church—at least pre-reformation—had not allowed its parishioners to fully participate in the life of Christ.⁴² They could not read the scriptures in their native language, the sermons were usually in Latin, and priests existed on a social and intellectual plane far removed from their congregants. The Protestant Reformation changed all of this. The Reformation not only shattered the power of ecclesiastical authority, but it brought religion to the commoners through the rise of religious education. Adams once stated at a crowded Fourth of July celebration: "The religious reformation was an improvement in the science of the mind; an improvement in the intercourse of man with his creator, and in his acquaintance with himself. It was an advance in the knowledge of his duties and his rights."⁴³ Without the interference of the Catholic Church, citizens became intellectually freer. They could finally pursue virtue without having it dictated to them.

For all the great work done by the Protestant Reformation, Adams contended that a vestige of political tyranny lingered over the Western world in the form of absolute monarchy. The American Revolution played a unique role in finally bringing forth a government capable of cultivating and sustaining freedom in its fullest sense. In his account of the road to American independence, the colonists had happily lived for decades with the same rights and privileges enjoyed by Englishmen in the mother country. However, after the

⁴¹ Adams, *An Address ... Celebrating the Anniversary of Independence ... on the Fourth of July 1821* (Cambridge, MA: Hilliard and Metcalf, 1821), 3; emphasis on *body* and *soul* mine.

⁴² Adams frequently attended Roman Catholic services and was personally close to the leader of the Jesuits while minister to Russia. Still, his lingering admiration for the Church did not prevent him from being critical of its faults.

⁴³ Adams, *An Address ... Celebrating the Anniversary of Independence*, 5.

French and Indian War, Parliament began to assert its absolute authority. It became clear to the colonists that “English liberties had failed them,” and so in their fight against the “omnipotence of Parliament the colonists appealed to the rights of man and the omnipotence of the God of battles.”⁴⁴ Thus Adams contends the prize of the conflict became “the liberty and the immortal soul of man.”⁴⁵

From this account of history, Adams argued that, in the last several centuries, events in Europe conspired to make possible (though perhaps not likely) the liberation of mankind. The Protestant Reformation freed the mind so virtue could self-consciously be cultivated in the human heart, and the American Revolution set in motion the liberation of man from political oppression. For Adams, virtue and freedom are deeply connected. He boldly declared that there is an inseparable link between “knowledge, and virtue and liberty.”⁴⁶ The three must exist together or they will not exist at all.

THE SOURCES OF ADAMS’S VISION

Though John Quincy Adams is one of America’s most accomplished political thinkers, his ideas did not develop in a vacuum. His vision of a republic oriented towards virtue drew heavily from many of the West’s most famous political philosophers as well as his political contemporaries. Despite spending many of his formative years educated in Paris at the very heart of the Enlightenment, a mounting distaste for modern philosophy defined Adams’s political theory. Initially a devotee of John Locke and Montesquieu, in his later years Adams described such writings as hopelessly trite compared to the musings of ancient thinkers.⁴⁷ Adams’s preference for the ancient over modern writers accounts for some of the distinctiveness of his thought. At a time when the most influential authors hailed from the University of Edinburgh, Adams drew his inspiration from long dead Romans and Greeks. This gives his ideas a unique and antiquated flavor in the modern world.

Among the ancient philosophers, the Roman thinker and statesman Cicero stood out as Adams’s clear favorite. In the wake of his defeat to Andrew Jackson, he turned to Cicero for comfort, re-reading the entirety of the Roman’s collected works as he sulked in a brief

⁴⁴ Adams, *The Jubilee of the Constitution. A Discourse Delivered ... in New York ... April 1839* (New York: Samuel Colman, 1839), 9.

⁴⁵ Adams, *Letter ... Read at the Celebration of West Indian Emancipation in Bangor, (ME)*, July 4, 1843, 3.

⁴⁶ Adams, *A Discourse on Education*, 28; emphasis added.

⁴⁷ Adams, *John Quincy Adams Diary*, April 1829.

retirement. When he designed a family crest for himself, Adams borrowed a line from Cicero: “He plants trees for another age.”⁴⁸ Adams’s admiration for Cicero is most obvious in a series of lectures he delivered when appointed as Harvard’s first professor of rhetoric. He tried to make the case for the revival of ancient rhetoric as superior to more contemporary styles of public speaking.⁴⁹ He argued that alone among the many sciences, rhetoric had reached its perfection in the ancient world. The ancient writers who most comprehensively studied the subject saw rhetoric as the greatest art. “A subject which has exhausted the genius of Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilien,” said Adams, “can neither require nor admit much additional illustration. To select, combine, and apply their precepts is the only duty left for their followers of all succeeding times.”⁵⁰ He spends the remainder of his lectures articulating the style and execution of Ciceronian rhetoric.

“Old Man Eloquent,” as Adams was called in Congress, lifted more than his distinctive rhetorical style from Cicero. He shared the Roman’s concern for virtue, a state of being both thought vital to the very survival of republican government. Both men felt that virtue is not so much the product of following particular rules and regulations, but instead uses reason to elevate natural human longings. In their view, it is “by our passions and appetites, we are placed on a level with the herds of the forest; by our reason we participate in the divine nature itself.”⁵¹

Adams did not lift his ideas completely from the Ancients; he combined them with his meticulously researched Christian theology. As in many other subjects in his life, Adams formed his opinions on religion only after painstaking study of the topic. While ambassador to Russia he voraciously consumed a series of books on world religions, read the latest writings in contemporary theological debates, and throughout his life maintained the practice of reading the entire Bible each year. If he completed early, he would start over again, but this time translate the holy text from another language into English.

Denominationally, Adams attended the unitarian church of his forefathers. More generally, Adams’s careful deliberations on the question of religion led him to a fairly liberal Christian theology. He argued that man receives salvation not through simple belief in Christ

⁴⁸ “*Serit Arbores Quoe Alteri Seculo Prosint.*”

⁴⁹ Lyon Rathbun, “The Ciceronian Rhetoric of John Quincy Adams,” *Rhetorica* 18, no. 2 (Spring 2000): 175–215.

⁵⁰ Adams, *Lectures on Rhetoric and Oratory*, 29.

⁵¹ Adams, *Lectures on Rhetoric and Oratory*, 65.

(if indeed such belief plays any role at all) but rather through good works.⁵² He summarized the teachings of Jesus simply as the undeniable “immortality of the soul” and the “law of brotherly love, founded upon the principle of natural equality,” which demands of us tireless devotion to our fellow man.⁵³ Adams blended the Christian conception of virtue with classical thinking in interesting ways: Christianity provided the true meaning of virtue while thinkers like Cicero showed how important reasoned self-improvement was for attaining this virtue.

Adams’s work as a politician forced him to weave his theory of virtue into the political framework of his time. Because of this, he added to his pre-modern cast of influences a variety of contemporary factions and individuals: Anti-Federalists, Federalists, British Whigs, Democratic-Republicans, and perhaps most importantly his father, John Adams. One of the best traveled men of his age, Adams’s many trips abroad often influenced his political stances. While serving as Ambassador to Russia he became a close personal friend of Czar Alexander I. Though Adams disapproved of the despotic Russian system, he could not help but admire the czar’s attempts to create an enlightened nation, a task Adams increasingly felt should be central to American public policy.⁵⁴ In particular, Adams learned from observing the czar the art of administration: how to cultivate and maintain a competent and educated civil service,⁵⁵ and he endeavored to apply this lesson serving as president.

Much earlier in his life, Adams attended debates in the British House of Commons and found himself deeply impressed with the prominent Whig statesman and writer Edmund Burke.⁵⁶ In the aftermath of the French Revolution, Adams’s first major publication reviewed the debate between Burke and Thomas Paine. Once again, Adams expressed his admiration for the British author. Like Burke, Adams dedicated his career to a mixture of principle and pragmatic politics, a task they each adopted with such ruthless fervor that they came to be seen as hopelessly quarrelsome by many contemporaries. Burke and Adams also shared a belief that culture serves as the genuine foundation of a political system. In the end though,

⁵² Adams, *John Quincy Adams Diary*, November 27, 1785. We should not underestimate the faith Adams placed in belief in some supreme being. As David Tucker, “John Quincy Adams On Principle and Practice,” 274, writes: “In keeping with his understanding of the limits of human reason, Adams did not believe that unaided reason was capable of grasping the unity of God.... Adams saw the revelation of a single caring Supreme Being as the necessary foundation for morality and justice. Without the idea of a Supreme Being and the rewards and punishments He supposed most men would have no motive to act morally.”

⁵³ Adams, *Discourse on Education*, 13.

⁵⁴ Adams, *John Quincy Adams Diary*, May 6, 1811.

⁵⁵ Adams, *John Quincy Adams Diary*, May 6, 1811.

⁵⁶ Adams, *John Quincy Adams Diary*, October 17, 1783.

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Adams felt that Burke's love of tradition and prescription blinded him to just how important a role natural rights can and should play in a regime.

The longest lasting influence upon Adams was his father. Like his son, John Adams combined the work of statesman and political theorist. The political musings of father and son often paralleled one another.⁵⁷ Both shared a deep concern for how to structure a modern constitutional order designed to both restrain the vices of their fellow man but also to encourage virtue.⁵⁸ John Adams also shared with his son a strong belief that pure democracy could only spell the end of a prosperous America. He argued that only by maintaining a mixed regime through which both the wealthy and poor could be assured representation could the American republic survive.⁵⁹ John Quincy Adams echoed this sentiment in his later writings.

More interesting than the similarities between the two Admasses are their differences. Though a deeply original thinker in many ways, John Adams shared with most men of his generation a much greater interest in how institutional arrangements could be carefully created to encourage the best society. The art of constitutional construction was more often than not a procedural affair. John Quincy Adams departed from this conception of politics and instead argued that culture rather than institutional design served as the foundation of a regime. This helps to explain why he felt so passionately that in order for republican government to survive in America, it required a cultural rather than a structural change.

SLAVERY AND FREEDOM

Adams was no mere armchair philosopher; in a public career spanning decades he was able to work out his principle of freedom directly in the arena of politics. On no issue was this work more evident than in his involvement in the debate over slavery. On February 24, 1820, while the Senate was locked in debate about whether or not to admit Missouri as a slave state, Secretary of State John Quincy Adams and Secretary of War John C. Calhoun walked home from a cabinet meeting together. The two statesmen had a great deal in common. Both were withdrawn, morose intellectuals who at the time supported a powerful national government.

⁵⁷ For a joint analysis of the two Adams's see Sara Georgini, *Household Gods: The Religious Lives of the Adams Family* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023).

⁵⁸ C. Bradley Thompson, *John Adams and the Spirit of Liberty* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2002).

⁵⁹ Gordon S. Wood, *Empire of Liberty: A History of the Early Republic, 1789-1815* (Oxford: Oxford University Library, 2011), 213.

But in this instance, they could not have disagreed more. Calhoun stated frankly to his northern friend that, though he did not think the union about to dissolve, the South certainly would be willing to do so if it felt slavery were threatened.⁶⁰ Adams was taken aback by this extreme response, and when he arrived home, he reflected that a temporary dissolution of the union would perhaps be preferable to the continuation of slavery within its borders.⁶¹ In his view slavery corrupted the virtue of the slaveholder, slaves, and the republic itself. Its extinction was thus not just a matter of moral duty, but vital to sustaining liberty in America.

Adams had not always felt so strongly about slavery. When he was appointed secretary of state in 1817, he had a spotty record on the issue. Like his father before him, it was well known that Adams opposed the peculiar institution; however, this opposition rarely translated into action or policy proposals. In fact, as ambassador to Great Britain Adams unsuccessfully worked to return American slaves captured and freed by the British in the War of 1812 to their owners. However, in the eight years he served as the nation's chief diplomat, Adams's anti-slavery views hardened, and he started to view chattel slavery as the single greatest threat to freedom in America.

The reason Adams shifted his views had little to do with his own political thought—at no point in his life did he think slavery anything but a repugnant attack on human virtue—but instead with the changing mores of the South. In his early career, Adams felt the South was duly ashamed that half of its population was held in bondage to the other half. While this was the case, he felt that the extinction of slavery could not be far off. In this respect he shared the views of most of the American founders. As Gordon Wood observes, there was evidence that slavery was dying out.⁶² However, by the time Adams was made secretary of state, slavery was openly embraced as a positive good by most of the Southern upper class. Figures such as Calhoun were happy to declare that the principles of natural right “were just and noble” but only applied to white men, and that, without the institution of slavery, there could be no meaningful equality among whites.⁶³ Such arguments were made possible by the

⁶⁰ Adams, *John Quincy Adams Diary*, February 24, 1820.

⁶¹ Adams, *John Quincy Adams Diary*, February 24, 1820.

⁶² Gordon S. Wood, *Revolutionary Characters: What Made the Founders Different* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2006), 27.

⁶³ Adams, *John Quincy Adams Diary*, March 3, 1820.

rising intellectual consensus in the American South that black people were a different species altogether, one not much higher than a farm animal.⁶⁴

Adams thought that one of the great threats of slavery was the way it corrupted the virtue of slaveholders and their supporters. He declared, “It is among the evils of Slavery that it taints the very sources of moral principle—It establishes false estimates of virtue and vice; for what can be more false and heartless than this doctrine which makes the first and holiest rights of humanity to depend upon the color of the skin.”⁶⁵ In so doing, slavery undermined reason itself, for to believe something so bald-facedly untrue, reason would have to be abandoned in favor of mere prejudice.⁶⁶ He also argued, “The domineering Spirit, naturally springs from the institution of Slavery,”⁶⁷ thus pumping a wave of tyrannical and illiberal sentiments into certain quarters of the American Republic and corrupting its leaders who could otherwise be of service to their country—men such as Calhoun and Andrew Jackson. Slavery twisted the mind of the masters, destroyed their sense of Christian charity, and replaced it with vulgar tyrannical impulses.⁶⁸ In short, the system of slavery robbed not just the slaves but the slaveholders of freedom according to Adams’s conception of the term.

Slavery inevitably corrupted the slaves. By denying them freedom and education, slaveholders deprived many black Americans of the ability to pursue man’s highest calling: the attainment of virtue. Adams described their condition in vivid terms: “Cursed by the mere color of their skin—already doomed by their complexion to drudge in the lowest offices of society, excluded by their color from all the refined enjoyments of life, accessible to others, excluded from the benefits of a liberal education; from the bed, from the table, and from all other social comforts of domestic life.”⁶⁹ Such conditions made learning and human improvement impossible. Like his hero Cicero, Adams tended to think that one without

⁶⁴ By the mid-nineteenth century racist theories of science had become even harsher than the race prejudice present in the founding. Following in the footsteps of Arthur de Gobineau, figures such as George Fitzhugh, *Cannibals All! Or, Slavery Without Masters*, ed. C. Vann Woodward (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960), constructed detailed scientific explanations for what they argued were blacks’ inherently violent and uneducable natures.

⁶⁵ Adams, *John Quincy Adams Diary*, March 3, 1820.

⁶⁶ Adams, *John Quincy Adams Diary*, March 3, 1820.

⁶⁷ Adams, *John Quincy Adams Diary*, June 1, 1830.

⁶⁸ Adams, *John Quincy Adams Diary*, January 8, 1836, argued that slavery caused the “relaxation of the moral principle in its application to individual obligation necessarily resulting from ancient and established institutions.” Greenstone, *The Lincoln Persuasion*, 204, writes that for Adams, “all segments of society—all citizens—must subordinate their own passions and interests to the society’s limits on individual aggrandizement, to a rule of right that was essential to a republican polity.... From this perspective, the unlimited power of the masters over slaves—and the unlimited indulgence of passions that such powers sometimes encouraged—was essentially un-republican.”

⁶⁹ Adams, *John Quincy Adams Diary*, November 29, 1820.

education and virtue is not fully human.⁷⁰ For “limited as it was, reason elevated man above brute creation; and coupled to a disciplined will, allowed him to improve his condition in this life and prepare for the next.”⁷¹ Thus in his way he agreed with the slaveholders. Black slaves were not fully human, but Adams saw this as a tragedy, a consequence of their circumstances rather than natural differences.⁷² He thought it the duty of any good Christian to raise up people found in this pitiable condition and to give them the means to pursue virtue and fully attain their humanity.⁷³

Adams also argued that slavery corrupted the United States Constitution, gradually taking the regime down a path toward tyranny. He argued that the Declaration of Independence, which he understood as a great communitarian liberal document, was the cornerstone of the Constitution. All constitutional interpretation must first contend with the inalienable rights declared in that hallowed piece of parchment.⁷⁴ Adams conceded that the Constitution legally sanctioned slavery in a number of articles, but he also contended that the principle that informed it—that all men are created equal—was inherently anti-slavery. As he fumed in his diary, “The Declaration of Independence not only asserts the natural equality of all men, and their inalienable right to Liberty; but that the only *just* powers of government are derived from the consent of the governed. A power for one part of the people to make slaves of the other can never be derived from consent and is therefore not a just power.”⁷⁵

Adams thought this contradiction in the Constitution—that its fundamental principles opposed slavery while provisions of the document itself protected the peculiar institution—created an unstable political order in the United States. In essence, it created a constitution at war with itself.⁷⁶ Adams could not conceive how a regime so constituted could long survive.⁷⁷ By his tenure as secretary of state he concluded that the bargain the framers made

⁷⁰ He expressed this sentiment most fully in his *Lectures on Rhetoric and Oratory*: “The peculiar and highest characteristic, which distinguishes man from the rest of the animal creation is reason. ... By our passions and appetites we are placed on a level with the herds of the forest; by our reason we participate of the divine nature itself ... “It is by the gift of reason, that the human species enjoys the exclusive and inestimable privilege of progressive improvement, and is enabled to avail itself of the advantages of individual discovery.” *Lectures on Rhetoric and Oratory*, Rhetoric, Vol 1, pg 14.

⁷¹ Tucker, John Quincy Adams on Principle and Practice,” 273.

⁷² Adams, *John Quincy Adams Diary*, April 29, 1841.

⁷³ Adams, *John Quincy Adams Diary*, April 29, 1841.

⁷⁴ Adams, *John Quincy Adams Diary*, March 3, 1820; *An Address ... Celebrating the Anniversary of Independence*, 24.

⁷⁵ Adams, *John Quincy Adams Diary*, March 3, 1820.

⁷⁶ Adams, *John Quincy Adams Diary*, March 3, 1820.

⁷⁷ Adams, *John Quincy Adams Diary*, October 14, 1833.

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with the slaveholding interest of the South was a mistake.⁷⁸ The compromise had been struck to ensure the survival of the Union, but Adams doubted the Union could last much longer if divided between slaveholders and non-slaveholders.

Adams feared that the Constitution's three-fifths compromise might be even worse than its compromise with slavery. He saw this provision as the means by which slaveholders had commandeered control of Congress. The result was that "slave representation has governed the Union" rather than virtue,⁷⁹ and he declared privately: "A dissolution, at least temporary of the Union as now constituted would be certainly necessary, and the dissolution must be upon a point involving the question of slavery, and no other. The union might then be reorganized, on the fundamental principle of emancipation. This object is vast in its compass—awful in its prospects, sublime and beautiful in its issue. A life devoted to it would be nobly spent or sacrificed."⁸⁰ In the final analysis Adams proved unwilling to dissolve the union to end slavery, but these insights forced him into increasingly firm opposition to slavery, a crusade that reached its zenith in his final years serving in Congress.

FIGHTING THE SLAVE CAUSE

When Adams left the presidency, he planned to follow in the footsteps of his predecessors and retire to his country home in Massachusetts. There he would spend his remaining years reading and writing political philosophy. However, these plans soon changed when several community leaders approached Adams to gauge his interest in representing Quincy in the House of Representatives. Feigning disinterest in the fashion of the eighteenth-century politicians he so admired, Adams replied he would do nothing to campaign for the position, but he would not decline if elected. Both his wife and son were outraged at the suggestion. They thought it undignified for a former president to return to office in such a lowly post and urged him to write back and decline the post before it was too late. Adams flatly refused,

⁷⁸ Adams, *John Quincy Adams Diary*, March 3, 1820: "the bargain between Freedom and Slavery contained in the Constitution of the United States, is morally and politically vicious—Inconsistent with the principles upon which alone our revolution can be justified; cruel and oppressive by riveting the chains of Slavery—by pledging the faith of Freedom to maintain and perpetuate the tyranny of the master, and grossly unequal and impolitic, by admitting that Slaves are at once enemies to be kept in subjection, property to be secured or restored to their owners, and persons, not to be represented themselves."

⁷⁹ Adams, *John Quincy Adams Diary*, March 3, 1820.

⁸⁰ Adams, *John Quincy Adams Diary*, February 24, 1820. Though to be clear, Adams was not always willing to sacrifice the union on the altar of abolition. This particular sentiment varied greatly with his mood.

and on November 6, 1830, when his neighbors elected him to represent them in Congress, he recorded his tangible excitement in his diary. His initial enthusiasm abated somewhat as the Jacksonian majority in Congress shunted him to a relatively minor committee chairmanship (manufacturing).⁸¹ Adams's preference was to chair the Foreign Affairs Committee, a position he believed his long years abroad made him well suited for, but this prestigious post was more than the Jacksonians were willing to grant. Despite this setback, he resolved to relentlessly pursue the same policy of improvement that had guided his career since entering public service at age twenty-seven, regardless of committee assignment.

President Adams did little to confront the issue of slavery, but Congressman Adams represented a staunchly anti-slavery district and possessed much greater leeway in dealing with the issue. However, Adams was no abolitionist. As Peter Charles Hoffer points out, Adams "viewed the rise of the abolitionist movement with a certain realistic detachment. He thought slavery an abomination, but he had little use for radical abolitionist plans."⁸² Adams was keenly aware that directly attacking slavery on the floor of the House of Representatives would do little more than inflame public opinion without winning majority support. As a result, he approached the issue indirectly. On his first day, he presented a petition from the Quakers of Pennsylvania praying for the abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia.

Though Adams made clear that he simply wished to present a petition he received rather than his own views, the Quaker's plea set off a firestorm on the floor of the House. James Henry Hammond, the representative from Columbia, South Carolina led the charge against Adams and his petitioners. He argued that opposing slavery would lead to America's economic decline "for without [slavery] our fertile soil and our fructifying climate would have been given to us in vain."⁸³ He further attempted to demonstrate that slavery gave America its distinct and glorious culture. The thrust of Hammond's speech was not subtle; Adams and his petition would destroy the country and any measure possible must be adopted to prevent this event. Led by Hammond and the South Carolina delegation, the House began to debate a resolution that would force the body to be silent on the issue of slavery: "Resolved

⁸¹ Adams's assignment, absent his affiliation with any party, may be attributed to two factors: the second party system was relatively new and partisan conventions were not so firm, and, as a former president the other members believed Adams was entitled to more than the usual deference given to freshman congressmen.

⁸² Peter Charles Hoffer, *John Quincy Adams and the Gag Rule, 1835-1850* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017), 49.

⁸³ *Register of Debates, House of Representatives, 24th Congress, 1st Session*, 2456.

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that all petitions, memorial, resolutions, propositions, or papers, relating in any way or to any extent whatever to the subject of slavery, or the abolition of slavery, shall without being either printed or referred, be laid upon the table and that no further action whatever shall be had thereon.”⁸⁴

Adams immediately attempted to speak on the issue so he could voice his objections, however the Speaker of the House, future President James K. Polk, consistently denied him the floor. Unperturbed Adams shouted from his seat that the resolution was unconstitutional, and an attempt to gag an elected representative of the people (thus giving the resolution its famous moniker). Despite the staunch opposition of Adams and his northern Whig allies, the resolution passed, and it was almost certainly a product of the Deep South’s over-representation in Congress from the Constitution’s three-fifths clause. The resolution also carried the firm support of President Martin Van Buren, who saw this as a way to defuse political tension in the nation and perhaps boost his own waning popularity.

Though Southern members of Congress considered the matter settled, Adams refused to allow the issue to rest quite so easily. He continually presented petitions dealing with slavery to force members to debate the gag rule with him. Each time Southerners raised the issue, Adams did not attack slavery but instead focused his attention on the constitutional problem. He argued that the gag rule violated not some abstract natural right but every citizen’s legal right to petition their government as enshrined in the First Amendment to the Constitution. What is more, by closing the floor of the House of Representatives to some matters, Adams contended that the Southern representatives had abandoned their duty to debate all issues of importance to their various constituents. As he declared in a lame-duck session of the twenty-fourth Congress: “he hoped the people of this country would not tamely submit to the injustice and wrong which would be inflicted upon them by their immediate representatives in deciding that their petitions would not be received.”⁸⁵ In short, he argued that in their zeal to protect slavery, the Southern members of Congress upended the constitutionally granted rights of all people, not just the enslaved.

Many of Adams’s failures as president stemmed from his stubborn refusal to court public opinion and drum up support for his policies. Evidently, he learned from this mistake as he

⁸⁴ *Register of Debates, House of Representatives, 24th Congress, 1st Session*, 4028.

⁸⁵ *Register of Debates, House of Representatives, 24th Congress, 2nd Session*, 1314.

entered Congress because his war against the gag rule was clearly designed to persuade the public and not the members of the House. Adams knew a majority of his fellow representatives supported the gag rule, but he also knew that the galleries of the House chamber were stuffed with newspaper editors recording the major speeches of the day. The reports of these speeches would then be read by interested citizens all over the country who could not help but learn about the gag rule because Adams mentioned it so frequently. In addition, alongside each appearance of the gag rule debate would be Adams's constitutional argument against the resolution. Adams carefully monitored the way his speeches shaped public opinion through the letters he received from citizens in the mail. Many encouraged him to keep up the fight, and many more threatened his life for betraying his race. Adams's favorite letters were the ones demonstrating that not only was his strategy of attack proving successful, but that many of the people writing him had become greater opponents of slavery because they saw the way the issue allowed their own rights to be ignominiously stripped.

Losing patience with Adams's continued defiance of the gag rule, Southern representatives plotted for a way to neutralize him as a threat to their cause. The opportunity for just such an action seemed to present itself in February 1837. On the day appointed to present petitions, Adams rose to his feet and asked the Speaker of the House if it would be possible to present a petition written and signed by twenty-two slaves. He explained that he personally felt unsure if slaves were granted the right of petition by the Constitution, so he would defer to the Speaker's judgment on the matter. The inquiry sent Southern members of the House into a frenzy. They understood that though Adams seemed to be asking a merely procedural question, he was essentially opening the floor to a debate on whether slaves were granted rights by the Constitution, a much larger and thornier issue. Charles Haynes of Georgia spoke for the Southern delegates when he declared: "He was astonished at the course pursued by the gentleman from Massachusetts, not only on this day but on every day for some weeks since, but his astonishment had reached a height which he could not express" in the face of this most recent petition and the identity of its authors.⁸⁶ Almost immediately following these remarks, the Southern members began to debate the possibility of censuring Adams. Waddy Thompson of South Carolina provided the final language for the censure:

⁸⁶ *Register of Debates, House of Representatives, 24th Congress, 2nd Session*, 1587.

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That [Mr. Adams] by his attempt to introduce into this house a petition by slaves for the abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia committed an outrage on the rights and feelings of a large portion of the people of this Union; a flagrant contempt on the dignity of this house, and by extending to slaves, a privilege only belonging to freemen, directly incites the slave population to insurrection, and that the said member be forthwith called to the bar of the House and be censured by the speaker.⁸⁷

Adams rose in defense of himself the next day to argue that the proposed censure poorly understood the slave petition he had tried to present. Contrary to Thompson's assumption, the petition did not advocate the abolition of slavery; in fact, it prayed for the opposite—the twenty-two slaves were speaking on behalf of the institution that kept them in bondage. He continued: "If the gentleman was about to press his motion, and the House was about to adopt it, they would be under the necessity of seeing what the paper was, and to that he would willingly submit."⁸⁸ The Speaker would have to accept the petition and read it into the record to prove it said what the censure affirmed it did. In short, the petition served as bait meant to enrage the Southern delegates and show just how little respect they had for the rights granted in the First Amendment. Adams's reasonable and largely technical defense left the Southern representatives in disarray. They spent the rest of the week debating alternative language for a censure, each time giving Adams an excuse to rise and attack the gag rule.

In the end, Adams's constant battering against the gag rule began to shift public opinion, particularly in the North. On December 3, 1844, Adams proposed a resolution suspending the gag rule. No opposition to the motion arose from a single Northern representative, and by managing to pick up four Southern Whigs, the resolution passed 108-80. This suspended the gag rule and the mention of slavery no longer violated the rules of the House. Unusually humble in victory, Adams let the issue die without drawing attention to the matter.

Outside of his work in Congress, Adams attacked the institution of slavery in one other way: his famous defense of the Mende people in the *Amistad* case. The court case centered around a group of Mende Africans who were captured in their homeland to be sold as slaves in Cuba. Midway across the Atlantic, the Mende revolted against their captors and took the ship by force. The ship was later captured by the US Navy, and the Mende slaves were put in United States' custody while the courts decided their fate. The legal case proved an

⁸⁷ *Register of Debates, House of Representatives, 24th Congress, 2nd Session*, 1587.

⁸⁸ *Register of Debates, House of Representatives, 24th Congress, 2nd Session*, 1587.

unusually complicated one. Various treaties with Spain seemed to give young Queen Isabella II some legal claim on the slaves. The surviving crew of the ship argued that the slaves were their legal property, but the lawyers representing the Mende contended that they were being illegally held in the first place. After a series of dramatic and well-publicized lower court cases, the Supreme Court agreed to hear *United States v. The Amistad*.

Initially reluctant to be involved in the affair, Adams agreed to serve as one of the leading defense attorneys in the case when it came before the Supreme Court. He did so for two reasons. After following the case in the papers he found himself increasingly invested in its outcome, but he also felt that his distinguished name would help lend credence to the claims of the Mende. On February 24, 1841, Adams made his four and a half hour defense of the captured slaves. He began his defense with a long and complex account of the issues of international law involved in the case in an attempt to prove the Spanish claim irrelevant.

Concluding his more strictly legalistic arguments, Adams ended his defense on the grounds of natural rights. He declared that he took great consolation “from the thought this court is a court of JUSTICE. And in saying so very trivial a thing, I should on any other occasion, perhaps, be unwarranted in asking the court to consider what justice is. Justice is ... *‘the constant and perpetual will to secure to everyone HIS OWN right.’*”⁸⁹ He further argued that all humans are born with rights, and that these rights are not granted by governments based on the color of one’s skin. The question then before the court was whether slaves were people. If so, then they must have rights. To prove the personhood of slaves, Adams turned to the Constitution, which he argued “nowhere recognizes them [slaves] as property. The words slave and slaves are studiously excluded from the Constitution.... Slaves, therefore, in the Constitution of the United States are recognized only as persons, enjoying rights and held to the performance of duties.”⁹⁰ Given that the Mende were people and thus had inalienable rights granted by the creator of all beings, Adams did not see how the court could avoid siding with “the men who had resisted themselves to freedom, and secured their oppressors to abide the consequences of the acts of violence perpetrated against them.”⁹¹

⁸⁹ *Argument of John Quincy Adams ... In ... United States ... vs. Cinque, and Others, Africans* (New York: S.W. Benedict, 1841), 4; emphasis in original.

⁹⁰ *Argument of John Quincy Adams ... In ... United States ... vs. Cinque*, 39.

⁹¹ *Argument of John Quincy Adams ... In ... United States ... vs. Cinque*, 8.

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The Supreme Court ruled in favor of the Mende. The majority opinion, written by Justice Joseph Story, declared, “The conflict of rights between the parties, under such circumstances, becomes positive and inevitable, and must be decided upon the eternal principles of justice and international law.”⁹² The ruling relied mostly upon Adams’s arguments about international treaties in play, some of which he had helped write. He argued that when American sailors discovered the ship, the Africans rather than the Spanish held possession of the ship. This meant that the United States had no legal obligation to return them to Spain. The ruling proved a great victory in the fight against slavery, and though the court refused to fully endorse Adams’s reasoning, its discussion of “eternal principles of justice” certainly squinted in his direction. Adams’s opposition to slavery served as the defining aspect of his later career. In many ways, this is the cause for which he is best remembered. Certainly by the end of his life, it was the policy position that most inspired both the admiration and ire of his fellow Northerners.

THE ABOLITIONIST MOVEMENT AND CONSERVATIVE LIBERALISM

John Quincy Adams’ opposition to slavery in the House of Representatives transformed him from a former president of fading glory into one of the most controversial and dynamic figures in antebellum politics. His speeches railing against the gag rule and the slave interest that propped it up were published in Whig papers all over the country, earning him many admirers and critics. Some of the strongest followers and detractors of Adams were abolitionists working on the frontlines to achieve the ultimate extinction of slavery. Most admired Adams’s work against slavery in Congress, but many also wanted him to go further and resented the fact that he refused to openly declare himself to be a full-fledged member of their cause. Nonetheless, it is clear from reading the writings of prominent anti-slavery activists that they drew heavily from Adams’s public writings and grounded many of their claims in his distinctive brand of conservative liberalism. To be clear, the abolitionist movement was not dominated by conservative liberalism in all aspects, but it is important to highlight some of its common themes that built upon the ideas of John Quincy Adams and revealed the wider political impact of conservative liberalism in the United States.

⁹² *United States v. The Amistad*, 40 U.S. 521 (1841).

Much of the scholarship examining the end of slavery emphasizes the vital place that Lockean natural rights and the Declaration of Independence played in abolitionist arguments. This is certainly the case, though just as often abolitionist writers and ministers spoke of rights in a more communitarian fashion, highlighting the ways that slavery corrupted one's sense of duty for his fellow man, which they argued is the foundation of all rights. Alexander McLeod took a typical approach when he argued in "Negro Slavery Unjustifiable" that rights emerge not from human self-interest, which could provide a potential legitimate basis for slavery, but instead from humans' mutual obligations to one another as creations of God.⁹³ William Ellery Channing put it more simply when he declared that "man's rights belong to him as a Moral Being, as capable of perceiving moral distinctions, as a subject of moral obligation."⁹⁴ Abolitionist thinkers argued that slavery represented a particularly strong abandonment of this sense of duty and the rights that stemmed from them.⁹⁵

Chief among the rights threatened by slave masters was the right to liberty.⁹⁶ Though many pages of anti-slavery tracts were dedicated to attacking the physical enslavement of black Americans on the grounds of negative liberty, many were also dedicated to discussing the decidedly more positive concern of intellectual enslavement. It is just this sentiment that sparked Alexander Crummell to boldly declare in 1851, "If you wish to free a people from the effects of slavery, you must improve and elevate their character."⁹⁷ The emphasis on intellectual enslavement stemmed from the abolitionist belief that "God gave us intellectual power, that it should be cultivated," and that without this cultivation man is not truly free.⁹⁸

Slavery not only hampered the quest for virtue, but it worked to make it impossible. The institution of slavery was designed to transform the enslaved into "brutes" incapable of full human reasoning.⁹⁹ Abolitionists argued that this outcome multiplied the evils of slavery. By preventing slaves from learning to restrain themselves, "cowardice and cruelty, cunning and

⁹³ Alexander McLeod, "Negro Slavery Unjustifiable," in *Against Slavery: An Abolitionist Reader*, ed. Mason I. Lowance (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2000), 73.

⁹⁴ William Ellery Channing, "Slavery," in *Against Slavery*, 182.

⁹⁵ See David Walker, "An Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World," in *Against Slavery*, 136.

⁹⁶ Though it would be tangential to proving the point this article is arguing in regards to the abolitionists, it is important to note that many of them also accept the family as the foundation of society just like John Quincy Adams and in a stark rejection of more individualistic liberalism.

⁹⁷ Alexander Crummell, "An Address to the British Antislavery Society," in *Against Slavery*, 61.

⁹⁸ Channing, "Slavery," 183.

⁹⁹ Fredrick Douglass, "What To the Slave Is the Fourth of July," in *Against Slavery*, 41.

stupidity, abject submission, and deadly vindictiveness” were allowed to flourish.¹⁰⁰ Abolitionists did not think that the corruption of morals was a side effect inflicted solely on the enslaved. Slavery also twisted the ethics of the master by nourishing the passion for power and the vices that flow from it. Channing spoke for many abolitionists when he declared that “men’s worst crimes have sprung from the desire of being masters, of bending others to their yoke.”¹⁰¹ He further contended that it was thus hardly surprising that the white Southerners were defined by their cruelty, licentiousness, and fondness for tyrannical government.

For abolitionists, merely ending the bondage of black Americans would bring only partial freedom to the enslaved. Instead, the country must also dedicate itself to the moral and intellectual education of black people once freed from servitude. Abolitionists believed that by extending to slaves “the means of improvement” and allowing “them full opportunity to develop” their capacities, slaves could finally be given full liberty.¹⁰² More specifically, Lydia Marie Child contended that abolitionists must work to teach the slave about religion, literature, history, and all the other useful arts that produce virtue and respectability.¹⁰³ In short, for many abolitionists achieving freedom for Black Americans was a two-step process: first slaves must be released from their forced servitude, then they must be educated and freed from the slavery that a lack of a moral education brings with it.

Not only do these abolitionist arguments, which prominently feature positive liberty, bear a marked similarity to the political theory of John Quincy Adams, the abolitionist cause and the ideas that motivated it reveal the wider salience of conservative liberalism in shaping American politics.¹⁰⁴ The abolitionist focus on duty and a common humanity as the foundation of rights stands in stark contrast to Lockean liberalism, which bases rights on

¹⁰⁰ James Freeman Clarke, “Slavery in the United States,” in *Against Slavery*, 65. McLeod, “Negro Slavery Unjustifiable,” 74, stated that slavery “debases a part of the human race, and tends to destroy their intellectual and active powers. The slave from his infancy, is obliged implicitly to obey the will of another. There is no circumstance which can stimulate him to exercise. If he think or plan, his thoughts and plans must give way to those of his master. He must have less depravity of heart than his white brethren, otherwise he must, under this treatment, become thoughtless and sullen.”

¹⁰¹ Channing, “Slavery,” 185.

¹⁰² William Lloyd Garrison, “An Address to the British Antislavery Society,” in Lowance, *Against Slavery*, 61.

¹⁰³ Lydia Marie Child, “An Appeal In Favor of That Class Of Americans Called Africans,” in Lowance, *Against Slavery*, 172.

¹⁰⁴ For a compelling and informative account of John Quincy Adams’s interaction with the abolitionist movement, see Fred Kaplan, *Lincoln and the Abolitionists: John Quincy Adams, Slavery and the Civil War* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2018).

human self-interest. The result of this change was an ardent emphasis on positive liberty and the moral education needed to achieve it.

CONCLUSION

The customary narrative of America offered by scholars is that of a liberal nation built on a low but steady foundation of self-interest and dominated by individualistic negative liberty. There is a great deal of truth in this analysis; however, this paper has endeavored to show that this is not the whole truth. The ideas of John Quincy Adams reveal the importance of a different sort of liberalism in the United States, one that holds that humans are only truly free if they have mastered their own impulses without tyrannical interference. The historical implications of conservative liberalism's existence are vast. They expose the complex interplay of ideas that have shaped our nation and provide insight into the historical roots of seemingly discordant political phenomena in the twentieth century. However, exposing and examining the tradition of conservative liberalism serves an even greater purpose. It reminds us that a political order based on selfishness often begets selfish politics and that freedom without self-restraint is merely license. In an age like ours—dominated by nationalism, racism, and individualistic capitalism—it is worth remembering that self-interested pragmatism is not the only starting point for American liberalism. An alternative exists that understands that altruism and education must form the fabric of society and the foundation of government or there can be no lasting hope for liberal democracy or freedom.