



# The Mind of a Founder: Reflections on the Revolutionary Writings of John Adams

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Every Monday evening this past fall, as the leaves curled into winter and the 250th anniversary of the American founding approached, a small group of students gathered to discuss *The Revolutionary Writings of John Adams*. These last few months became a clarifying intellectual encounter with one of the nation's most overlooked founders. The seminar, organized by Dr. Danilo Petranovich of the Abigail Adams Institute (AAI), had many motivations and themes: civic piety, a nod to Adams as the husband of the Institute's namesake, the nation's semiquincentennial, scholarly escapism, and the timeless desire to understand the constitutional and philosophical architecture behind our nation.

For most participants, the discussions remained largely academic. Yet for me, a law student who walks past the John Adams Courthouse in Government Center each morning, and who grew up steeped in Massachusetts civic pride, the experience was something more intimate. I have been an admirer of Adams and his writings for several years, but reading him alongside others, who alternately challenged, doubted, critiqued, and were newly introduced to him, helped me clarify my own views and Adams' place amongst the pantheon of Founders.

The seminar unfolded in deliberate stages: broad political theory, the British-American constitutional crisis, Adams' republican turn, his constructive proposals for American government, and finally the Massachusetts Constitution of 1780, which I had the privilege of organizing and leading in our concluding session. Across these six weekly meetings, our group wrestled with questions that were not only historical but noticeably contemporary: the meaning of the common good, the legitimacy of civil and military authority, the limits of revolutionary violence, the role of religion in public life, and the fragility of constitutionalism in polarized times.

Our opening discussion centered on a deceptively simple question: Where do Adams' ideas come from? Was he a Puritan moralist formed by New England's theological rigor? A Christian republican defending the moral prerequisites of self-government? A lawyer shaped by common-law precedent and Whig constitutionalism? A classically-minded theorist concerned with the perennial problem of faction?

The first session oriented us toward these foundational questions, emphasizing their plurality rather than offering a single interpretive key. Adams is not reducible to any one tradition. This is, in my view, the secret to his enduring relevance. Adams refuses to indulge the inflamed, partisan romanticism that often surrounds revolutions. His theory of politics was anchored in what he famously called 'stubborn' facts: the constraints of human passion, the lessons of history, the demands of institutional design, and the moral inheritance of religious tradition. Where some detected shrewd cynicism or crafty shape-shifting rhetoric, I always characterized Adams' style as the method of an honest philosopher: to pursue the Truth with an overwhelming and totalizing industry, leaving no room for doubt or easy contradiction.

By the third and fourth sessions, we turned from Adams' general philosophy to the colonial crisis. Students arrived with serious questions: Had Adams overstated the constitutional abuses of Parliament? Was revolution justified? What would a British counterargument look like if we articulated it in its strongest form? These sessions produced some of the richest debates of the semester. The group was pressed to examine the loyalist arguments not simply as obstacles to American independence, but as sophisticated constitutional claims in their own right. We attempted to reconstruct Thomas Hutchinson's position with charity: that Parliament possessed imperial supremacy, that the colonies enjoyed only derivative rights, and that Adams' insistence on any American sovereignty was historically unfounded.

I remained firmly by Adams' side. As he marshaled precedent with a lawyer's precision, Adams also rooted his argument in deeper moral truths: that a people must govern themselves or be governed by the caprice of others. A people must control their own destiny. In this sense, Adams understood American resistance as pointing beyond itself, demanding its own fulfillment in the independence of a free, sovereign, American people.

The fourth and fifth sessions marked a turning point in our seminar, much as they did in Adams' own writing. Here Adams definitively broke with the British constitution and embraced a fully republican framework. Our close reading of *Thoughts on Government*, the six-page memorandum circulated in the critical months before independence, became a two-hour dissection of republican architecture. Adams' insistence on bicameralism, separation of powers, and a stabilizing executive was not abstract theorizing but a moral science grounded in human nature and enlightenment thinking. Men are ambitious. Factions form. Senates cool passions. Executives check assemblies. Constitutions, if they are to endure, must be fitted to the crooked timber of mankind.

All of this culminated in our final week: a deep dive into the Massachusetts Constitution of 1780, a document Adams singularly drafted while on a committee with Sam Adams and James Bowdoin II. As a Massachusetts native and a lifelong admirer of Adams, co-leading this session was a personal honor. Adams represents not only the best of Massachusetts but the best of America. Across fifteen years of intellectual labor, marked by professional setbacks, personal grief, and unyielding effort, Adams helped kindle in the colonies the very idea of sovereignty and self-government. It was this same discipline that enabled him to motivate public and private sentiment toward independence and to help secure its resolution and adoption at the Second Continental Congress. Then, if this were not enough, Adams went on to draft the longest concurrently working constitution in the world, and the primary inspiration for the United States Constitution. Few state constitutions have had such national and world-historic influence, and fewer still bear so clearly the imprint of a single mind.

To guide our discussion, I posed several questions about the meaning of the "common good," the relationship between public worship and republican virtue, the extent of religious qualifications for office, and the people's perpetual right to "reform, alter, or totally change" their government. I wanted the group to grapple with whether Adams' blend of civic republicanism, religious moralism, and individual liberty can withstand (or has withstood) the demands of a pluralistic, often fragmented America.

As the United States approaches its semiquincentennial, we face questions Adams would recognize: What is the purpose of government? What virtues must a republic cultivate? Can liberty survive without restraint? Can a people remain sovereign without a thorough grounding in history, the common law, philosophy, and political thought? Adams spoke for his generation: now at the 250th, *quis loquitur pro nobis? Quis vox populi?*

What I carry most from this seminar is not merely a deeper understanding of John Adams, though that alone would have justified our weeks together, but a renewed sense of what it means to study the founding seriously. In an era when historical memory is thin and civic confidence is fragile, revisiting Adams is a form of recovery. He reminds us that constitutional government is neither self-executing nor self-justifying. It requires institutions trustworthy enough to check ambition, and citizens willing to discipline their passions and uphold their intellectual and civilizational inheritance.

"This radical Change in the Principles, Opinions, Sentiments and Affection of the People, was the real American Revolution.

By what means, this great and important Alteration in the religious, Moral, political and Social Character of the People of thirteen Colonies, all distinct, unconnected and independent of each other, was begun, pursued and accomplished, it is surely interesting to Humanity to investigate, and perpetuate to Posterity."

- JOHN ADAMS TO HEZEKIAH NILES, FEBRUARY 13, 1818

