

John Adams: Party of One

Author and historian James Grant argues in his literary work, John Adams: Party of One, that John Adams was not the celebrity figure that Benjamin Franklin was during the Revolutionary Era, nor did Adams receive the same respect as fellow founder, George Washington. Rather, in stark contrast to the rest of the Founding Fathers, John Adams was a man whose devotion to his country was often marred by his stubborn and bluntly outspoken character¹. James Grant's biography sorts through Adam's frustrating experiences as a politician and provides a compelling account of the life of the second president of the United States. Grant's provides an unbiased chronicle of Adam's character, relationships, and role in the rise of party politics in America. Grant paints Adams as a revolutionary whose political brilliance was undermined by his temperament. Despite the tremendous impact the firestorm of party politics had on John Adam's political and personal relationships, Grant shows that Adams remained devoted to his personal and moral convictions as a politician, thus separating him to a "faction of one"².

James Grant reveals John Adams held numerous occupations over the course of his life, including "Son of Puritans", a schoolmaster, a lawyer, Founding Father, President of the United

¹ Grant. 4 – 5.

² Grant. 39.

States, and farmer³. Although Adams' profession constantly changed, his character remained constant.

According to Grant, Adams was a fiery and confrontational legal adversary⁴. Behind his blunt, outspoken, and argumentative front there was an honest and ethical man. Even during the turbulent events in the years leading up to the American Revolution, Adams never strayed from the ethics of his legal practice. Always professional, as Grant writes, Adams maintained his professionalism and avoided the influence of Boston's political activists. His cousin, Samuel Adams and the Sons of Liberty, were the driving force of the revolutionary rabble in Boston during the 1760's⁵. Even though at heart, John Adams was a fierce, but conservative revolutionary Adams shared many of the same revolutionary sentiments as his cousin, but he never abandoned his ethical duties in his defense of British Captain Thomas Preston and his men following the Boston Massacre of March 5, 1770⁶.

In his defense of Captain Thomas Preston, John Adams maintained his ethical nature which the author extensively writes of. John Adams believed in the impartiality and blindness of the law. Adams still represented Captain Preston and his, despite his strong patriotic views and sympathies for the colonial cause of liberty⁷. During the famous Massacre trial, Adams clearly stated in Grant's book, he was for the "prisoners of the bar" and would not allow his personal revolutionary views undermine the impartiality of the law and jeopardize the fate of Captain

³Grant. 19 – 30.

⁴ Grant. 39.

⁵ Grant. 5.

⁶ Grant 5, 97.

⁷ Grant. 86 – 87.

Preston and his men⁸. Despite the calls for a guilty verdict by the angry Bostonians and cousin Samuel Adams, Adams was able to justify the soldiers' actions, under the law, as self-defense. In the end it was Adams fierce temperament and his ethical and moral character that saved the lives of the Captain Preston and his men⁹.

Grant describes Adams as an anxious man, whose anxiety manifested into fear for his health¹⁰. This anxiousness also surfaced in his relationships as a diplomat in France and resulted in stubborn and antagonistic behavior that even aggravated his co plenipotentiary, Benjamin Franklin. This behavior came off as "delusional" and ultimately resulted in his reassignment by Congress to Amsterdam during the Revolutionary War¹¹.

Adams straightforward and often abrasive persona had a deep impact on the political relationships that he formed. According to Grant, Adam's blunt personality aggravated diplomatic relations with the French. Charles Gravier: the Comte de Vergennes, the French Foreign Minister, bore the brunt of Adam's stubborn and antagonistic personality during American Revolution when Adams and Benjamin Franklin were on a diplomatic mission to secure men and arms to aid the colonists against the British¹².

Grant writes that Adams was demanding and outspoken towards Vergennes, often angering him to the point where he asked Congress to recall the diplomat back to Philadelphia. Grant explains in depth of Adams' distaste for French culture and lust for pleasure. Adams saw

⁸ Grant. 97.

⁹ Grant. 4 – 5.

¹⁰ Grant 8, 26.

¹¹ Grant. 244.

¹² Grant 210 – 211.

the French's "lust for pleasure" as a major obstacle in the way of his diplomatic objective¹³. This greatly agitated John Adams, a man whose "born for business" attitude did not mesh well with French culture¹⁴.

John Adam's antagonistic personality also strained his relationship with partner and colleague in France, Benjamin Franklin. In contrast to Adams distaste for French culture, Franklin embraced it, living the life, as Grant argues, that had the "attributes of a modern rock star"¹⁵. Franklin kept an appointment book that was packed with dates to attend dinners, the theatre, and a game of checkers or chess, all of which provided a forum for diplomacy that the French embraced¹⁶. While Franklin partook in the life of leisure that France offered, Adams was more consumed by his diplomatic mission and grew openly frustrated with the leisurely style of diplomacy, becoming more abrasive and demanding towards French officials. Eventually, the John Adams' presence was no longer necessary and Benjamin Franklin was declared by Congress the sole plenipotentiary to France¹⁷. Adam's view of Benjamin Franklin would be forever tainted according to Grant, labeling him as "selfish, immoral and faithless"¹⁸.

As vice president and president, John Adam's character was always questioned and he was accused of undermining the principles of republican government. In Adam's work, *Defense of the Constitutions of Government of the United States of America*, he was criticized in stating

¹³ Grant 210.

¹⁴ Grant. 204.

¹⁵ Grant. 205.

¹⁶ Grant. 204 – 205.

¹⁷ Grant. 247.

¹⁸ Grant. 287.

that class distinctions are inevitable and that Constitutions exist to accommodate them. Furthermore, Adams explains the necessity for a strong central government with a powerful executive at its helm and a legislative branch to speak for the people. Within this strong government must exist a system of checks and balances to prevent abuses of power by one branch. However, there must be a strong executive, with a strong army, to command peace¹⁹.

As Vice President, Adams also fell under fire for his proposal to the Senate to issue a title to the President, an action that was deemed by many as contradictory of republicanism and an attempt to undermine the principles of republican government²⁰. Instead, discussion of titles incorrectly labeled Adams as a man who remained attached to the old form of rule. However, in a country that Grant describes that “had enough of a certain sovereign named George,” his proposal was not well received²¹. Senator William Maclay of Pennsylvania, along with Thomas Jefferson, feared that a title for the President, such as “your Majesty” would add to the growing doubts that republican ideals had been lost under the new Constitution²². This would not be the first time that Adams was accused of undermining republican ideals.

As President, as Grant shows, Adams was caught a midst the firestorm of party politics in the United States. James Grant paints the mood as fragile, describing the viscous struggle between Federalists and Republicans over the quasi, undeclared naval war the United States fought with France during Adams’ presidency. Fears of a potential infiltration of French

¹⁹ Grant. 334-335.

²⁰ Grant. 352 – 353.

²¹ Grant. 351-352.

²² Grant. 351.

revolutionary ideas on American soil and a possible full scale war with France aroused fierce debates and rivalries between the two political parties.

Alexander Hamilton, an extreme Federalist called for a war with France to protect their trade interests in Europe and harshly criticized Adams' hesitation to pursue an aggressive military solution. Adams sought to avoid a full scale war at all costs, much to the displeasure of Hamilton. Adams was reluctant to build an army to be used by Hamilton for territorial conquest and "military glory" in Europe²³.

Thomas Jefferson, Adams' Vice President and head of the Republican Party, sympathized with the French. Jefferson identified the French as revolutionary brothers and claimed that a common revolutionary bond existed between them and Americans. Moreover, he also argued that they held a common enemy in Great Britain.

Despite the differences between the two feuding political parties, John Adams had only one true objective in French crisis: peace. Under enormous pressure from Alexander Hamilton to engage the French in war, Adams sole mission was to avoid a war the young nation could not afford to fight. However, Grant shows Adams did authorize the creation of the U.S. Navy to protect American ships on the seas and to engage in an undeclared naval war in self-defense. James Grant praises Adams for successfully avoiding a full scale war with the French despite pressure from both political parties. Uninfluenced by Federalists and Republicans, Adams obtained his objective unilaterally, even at the expense of his reputation and political career.

²³ Grant 408 – 409.

The end of his political career came with the signing of the Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798 into law. The Alien and Sedition Acts were aimed to limit the spread of French radical ideas on American soil and made it illegal to publicly criticize the government through speech, newspaper, pamphlets, etc. Moreover, it imposed stringent citizenship laws and deported aliens that were found to be “dangerous to the peace and safety of the United States”²⁴. John Adams fell under intense criticism by Thomas Jefferson and the Republican Party for signing the Sedition Acts. Republicans argued that it undermined the basic principles of republican government to which the nation was founded upon. Jefferson attacked Adams and the Federalist party, stating they created the Sedition Acts as an “experiment of the American mind to see how far it will bear an avowed violation of the Constitution”²⁵. Grant consents to the notion that the Sedition Acts gave John Adams monarchial powers that made him capable of kingly acts, without obtaining the consent from Congress. However, James Grant credits Adams in stating that he never abused this power, which went unnoticed by the Republicans and criticized by Federalists, such as Alexander Hamilton²⁶.

The consequences of the Alien and Sedition Acts dealt a severe blow to John Adams reputation and relationships. Consequentially, Adams was not reelected for a second term and the Federalist Party was doomed to dissolution. Yet Grant seems to believe that this mattered little to Adams, a man who labeled “these Federalists as if they were from another tribe”²⁷. According to Republicans, Adams was merely a Federalist by association with his signing of the

²⁴ Grant. 405.

²⁵ Grant. 406 – 407.

²⁶ Grant. 405.

²⁷ Grant. 421.

Sedition Acts. Yet Adams' unwavering conduct during the French crisis obtained a peace that was unforeseen by the very same Republicans that labeled him a Federalist.

Adams' friendship with Thomas Jefferson, which Grant does not place enough emphasis on, also suffered. Yet, Grant disagrees with Jefferson and the Republicans, and pardons Adams for the Sedition Acts. In retrospect, Grant notes that some 20th century historians tend to side with John Adams rather than Thomas Jefferson and the Republicans. He uses historian, Samuel Eliot Morrison, to rebut Jefferson's claim that the Sedition Acts were a "Federalist Reign of Terror", pointing out that nobody was executed for crimes of sedition, nobody was tortured, the writ of habeas corpus was not suspended and public discussion was allowed²⁸. Also, he shows that Adams never abused his power as well. Clearly, Grant gives Adams the benefit of the doubt.

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James Grant's **Party of One** successfully sorts through the complicated character of John Adams to reveal a man devoted to his country. As shown in this book, John Adams was a man, despite his frustrations and personal attacks by his political adversaries, remained unmoved in his personal and moral convictions. John Adams was a man of "unconquerable intrepidity and incorruptible integrity" who always had intention of acting and making decisions for the greater public good²⁹. Although a frustrating political character, Grant praises Adams as a devoted patriot that dedicated himself to the principles of liberty and preservation of the United States.

²⁸ Grant. 407.

²⁹ Grant. 347.

Work Cited

James Grant. John Adams: Party of One. New York: Farrar, Strause and Giroux. 2005.