

Connections and Contradictions In Democratic Ideology: Juxtaposing Jefferson and Adams



First Place

By Michael Marlier

John Adams and Thomas Jefferson played an integral role in the creation of American democracy and popular sovereignty, and their opinions on the role of government shared similarities and inherent differences. Above all, the second and third presidents believed the primary function of government was to ensure happiness in the citizenry. Yet the inaugural addresses, historical criticisms, textbooks, biographies, and letter correspondence of the two revolutionaries revealed not only a tumultuous friendship, but also that Jefferson favored the leadership of man, and Adams preferred the leadership of laws.

Both attempted to answer the question proposed by Supreme Court Justice James Wilson on October 6, 1787, "There necessarily exists in every government a power from which there is no appeal; and which for that reason, may be termed supreme, absolute and uncontrollable. Where does this power reside?" (Lind 41). Jefferson sided with Wilson and agreed "the truth is that, in our governments, the supreme, absolute, and uncontrollable power remains in the people." And while Adams believed "our constitutions are superior to our legislatures," Wilson's rebuttal was "so the people are superior to our constitutions" (Lind 42). This argument is the fundamental contradiction between Jefferson and Adams's theories on popular sovereignty and the role of government.

Forged by personal progress and pitfalls, Thomas Jefferson developed his political ideology working among farmers and philosophers, advocating the American Revolution, leading careers as a successful statesman, and living a life of unquestionable passion and intellect. As a Democratic-Republican, Jefferson supported the interest of his agrarian counterparts, rallied against a central bank, favored Adam Smith's "invisible hand" approach to the burgeoning federal economy, and subscribed to the *compact theory* about popular sovereignty.

Called the "most brilliant proponent" of the compact theory, "South Carolina senator John C. Calhoun argued 'the people of the several States composing these United States are united as parties to a constitutional compact, to which the people of each State acceded as a separate sovereign community'" (Lind 44). Jefferson argued for a government chosen by the citizenry, that would elect just spokesmen for community interests, and naturally act accordingly to improve public welfare. If the government acted otherwise, swindling tax funds or passing oppressive legislation, then the citizens must revolt to protect their freedoms and control the republic.

Adams shared equally diverse passions that influenced his philosophies. Described as vain by some, and learned and thoughtful by others, Adams also lived a meritorious life and upheld the same dedication to democracy and freedom. After graduating and teaching at Harvard University, Adams' professional endeavors included law, diplomacy in France, the Netherlands and Britain, and eventually succeeding George Washington as president. The Federalist progeny and patriarch of a political dynasty, Adams represented the commercial and industrial interests of the aristocracy, advocated a larger centralized government, and supported the nationalist theory for popular sovereignty.

Speaking on the difference between compact and nationalist theory, in reference to the states ratifying the federal constitution, Samuel H. Beer explained that "nationalist theory required that ratification be both popular and national, a procedure which expressed the will of individuals, the ultimate authority in the republic, and which embraced a single nationwide constituency acting on behalf of the people at large in the United States" (Lind 45). Adams would have agreed that the republic needed a federal constitution to govern the state-peoples with laws, institute the will of the citizenry and protect their right to happiness. Ultimately, both agreed the government needed to ensure the basic rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, but their ideas on the government's interaction in maintaining these freedoms differed.

Notes on the State of Virginia explored topics that ranged from the aboriginal inhabitants of America to the distribution and collection of public funds. It identified Jefferson's dedication to protecting the popular sovereignty of Americans from government corruption, which followed John Locke's philosophy that it is the obligation of the citizenry, regardless of preexisting laws, to safeguard their happiness from tyranny.

Jefferson wrote, "The time to guard against corruption and tyranny, is before they shall have gotten hold on us" (Mansfield 31). To preserve democracy, Jefferson believed legislative power must be distributed proportionately among the states in order to ensure equal representation of the states. "It is better to keep the wolf out of the fold, than to trust to drawing his teeth and talons after he shall have entered" (Mansfield 3). Obviously, Jefferson supported a government serving the people, rather than servitude under a malevolent central leadership like the constitutional monarchy of King George.

In a letter to John Adams, dated June 27, 1813, Jefferson recalled the unity shared between the former party-members and referenced rifts developing in the fledgling republic. Each man valued independence over loyalty to England, but sought separate directions for the government's role. They frequently debated about the influence and threat of aristocracy controlling legislation of the burgeoning government, and the inalienable rights of the American citizen. Jefferson states:

"I think the best remedy is exactly that provided by all our constitutions, to leave the citizens the free election and separation of the *aristoi* and *pseudo-aristoi*, of the wheat from the chaff. In general, they will elect the real good and wise. In some instances, wealth may corrupt, and birth blind them; but not in sufficient degree to endanger the society" (Manfield 76).

Jefferson firmly believes the system cannot control the citizens. And the best way to prevent corruption was to keep power divided with checks and balances, delicately distributing political representation according to the populations of the infant states. "To secure these rights, governments derive their just powers from consent of the governed, and when any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or abolish it, and to institute a new Government..." (Mansfield ix).

The third president's firebrand letters exhibited his unrelenting support (and Enlightenment ideology) for the individual freedoms of the governed, and the obligation of the state to uphold the social rights of its citizenry, which he believed were granted by the Creator. Seven years after his second presidential term ended, Jefferson wrote Pierre Samuel Dupont de Nemours and said:

"We consider society as one of the natural wants with which man has been created; that he has been endowed by the faculties and qualities to effect its satisfaction by concurrence of others having the same want; that when, by the exercise of these faculties, he has procured a state of society, it is one of his acquisitions which he has a right to regulate and control, jointly indeed with all those who have concurred in the procurement whom he cannot exclude from its use or direction more than they him" (Mansfield 81).

As the conservative lawyer, John Adams identified his Federalist opinions on the role of government interaction, and obligated the elected officials to guarantee the rights of the citizenry with a network of laws and legislation. During the beginning of his third State of the Nation address from Philadelphia, Adams stated:

"To give due effect to the civil administration of Government and to insure a just execution of the laws, a revision and amendment of the judiciary system is indispensably necessary. In this extensive country it can not but happen that numerous questions respecting the interpretation of the laws and the rights of the numerous duties of officers and citizens must arise. On the one hand, the laws should be executed; on the other, individuals should be guarded from oppression" (Adams).

The address illustrated that Adams shared Jefferson's firm beliefs about the state's obligation to uphold the rights of the citizenry and govern by a system of laws and democracy to guarantee happiness. Jefferson did not separate the protection of freedoms into the hands of laws or individuals. They were one in the same.

As Locke and Jefferson stated, the duty of preventing tyranny, and entitling life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, is in the hands of the citizens; whereas Adams exhibited the idea that the law itself dictated and upheld the edicts of democracy and the republic.

Melded with the theories of James Harrington, Adams drafted his *Thoughts on Government* and included them in a letter to congressman William Hooper. Within the text he stated, "the greatest minds agreed that all good government was republican, and the 'true idea' of a republic was 'an empire of laws and not men'" (McCullough 102). The essay also advocated divided legislative branches (as did Jefferson), controlled by laws, which would check power from

being corrupted and maintain the rights and freedoms of the citizenry. "The purpose of government, he said...was the 'greatest quantity of human happiness'" (McCullough 121). Furthermore, Adams wrote:

"The form of government was best which produced the greatest amount of happiness for the largest number. And since all the 'sober inquiries after truth' agreed that happiness derived from virtue, that form of government with virtue as its foundation was more likely than any other to promote general happiness" (McCullough 103).

Adams viewed law as the harbinger and pathway to happiness as America congealed into a republic. And as a Federalist and supporter of the nationalist theory of popular sovereignty, he was the proponent of a stronger federal government that instituted the laws and rights set forth in the United States Constitution.

The fundamental debate between Adams and Jefferson was about their views on the enforcement and protection of happiness. Either it is to be upheld by the will and determination of man, as Jefferson believed, or society must set forth laws that ensure basic freedoms for the governed. Neither visionary agreed on where the power resided in America. The debate continued with letters and conversations until they both ironically died on July 4, 1826- 50 years to the date after America declared independence and embarked upon her successful exploration of popular sovereignty and democracy.

Today America governs herself with a combination of Jefferson and Adams's views on the role of the republic in the lives of the citizenry, but takes a more Adams-like, nationalized approach to democracy, especially after the terrorist attacks of September 11th. The opportunity for life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness was interrupted by the manifestation of terrorism on American soil. Following Adams's dedication for federal controls, President Bush launched Operation Enduring Freedom and created the Department of Homeland Security to eliminate the Taliban regime, investigate terrorist threats, and guard the happiness and freedom of America. And like the conflict stirred by President Adams' Alien and Sedition Acts aimed at foreigners in the infant America, recent racial profiling and government interrogation/tribunals for foreigners allegedly linked to terrorism have brought the legality of federal behavior under public criticism.

The ideologies of Jefferson and Adams on the government's role in the lives of the American citizenry are evident in modern legislation and continue to protect the unalienable rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. The philosophies of the second and third president still impact political thought and inspire debate amongst the lasting institutions of democracy and popular sovereignty that exist 150 years after their deaths.

Works Cited:

- Adams, John. *Third State of the Nation, Philadelphia, PA, 1799-12-03*.
<http://odur.let.ruug.nl/~usa/P/ja2/speeches/jason3.htm>.
- Adams, John. *Thoughts on Government*.
<http://odur.let.ruug.nl/~usa/P/ja2/writings/jason3.htm>.
- Americanpresidents.org CHAT. 2 April 1999.
<http://www.americanpresidents.org/chat040499.asp>.
- Americanpresidents.org CHAT. 22 March 1999.
<http://www.americanpresidents.org/chat032299.asp>.
- Davis, Kenneth. *Don't Know Much About History*. New York. Avon Books, 1990.
- Jefferson, Thomas. *Addresses, Messages, and Replies*.
<http://libertyonline.hypermall.com/Jefferson/Addresses.html>.
- Lind, Michael. "Do the People Rule?" *Wilson Quarterly*. Washington: 2001.
- Mansfield, Harvey. *Selected Jefferson Writings*. Wheeling. Harlan Davidson, Inc, 1979.
- McCullough, David. *John Adams*. New York. Simon and Schuster, 2001.
- Onuf, Peter. *Jeffersonian Legacies*. Charlottesville. University of Virginia Press, 1993.