Chapter 17

Conclusion

After 1800 Adams found himself alienated from most of those remaining in the Federalist Party. This was hardly surprising. Many of his friends, such as Gerry and Rush, went with the Jeffersonians. It was not long before his son, John Quincy Adams, traveled the same road.\(^1\) Again, it is not unnatural that he should renew friendly relations with Jefferson and John Taylor. A recent writer on Taylor states that “The greater part of his [Taylor’s] work which deals with contemporary political thought is opposed to the monarchical apologia of Adams and to the nationalism of the Federalist, each of which advocated a dangerous consolidation of power.”\(^2\) But this statement seems to miss a main point. It is perfectly true that Adams was a nationalist, Taylor an advocate of States’ rights. But the assumption that Taylor was a greater advocate of popular government is a doubtful one. Properly considered he is a rather strong proponent of agrarian aristocracy. Taylor favored self-government, but with aristocratic agrarian leadership. Such a program is one of the central themes of Taylor’s book, Inquiry into the Principles and Policy of the

\(^1\) Bemis, Samuel Flagg, *John Quincy Adams and the Foundation of American Foreign Policy.*

\(^2\) Mudge, *Social Philosophy of John Taylor of Caroline,* 29. Although not the case in Mudge, in many of the treatments of Taylor’s political thought there is confusion, which follows Taylor, between advocacy of agrarianism and advocacy of popular government. As a matter of fact, Taylor, while a strong agrarian, is actually a proponent of aristocracy. His protest is much more that of a displaced aristocracy, seeking to ally itself with the rising tide of popular government, than a genuine expression of opposition to all aristocracy. It is interesting to examine, for example, his *Arator* (Georgetown, 3d ed., 1817) at pp. 30, 31, 35 and 37 in the light of some of the generalizations of Gaetano Mosca in *The Ruling Class* (New York, 1939), especially at chapter XV. Cf. Manning J. Dauer and Hans Hammond, “John Taylor, Democrat or Aristocrat?”, *Journal of Politics,* VI, 381-403 (1944) .
Government of the United States. Taylor found Adams in agreement with many of the strictures he made on the economic policies of the government. At the same time Adams was rather amused at the criticism of his (Adams') presentation of the subject of aristocracy. Adams thought he had merely made a realistic set of observations; he had not advocated that the aristocracy should dominate. Out of the active political arena he could consider the whole matter more objectively than was the case while he was in politics. He replied to Taylor in a friendly letter and prepared a longer series as a reply, but never published it.

On the other hand, the relations of both John and John Quincy Adams with the Federalists of Massachusetts grew worse. It was not long before a series of bitter public controversies developed with the members of the "Essex Junto." It was possible to make peace with the agrarians; with the commercial group he could not long remain on good terms. As a matter of fact, the mid-position which Adams desired to achieve was adopted, in the main, by Jefferson and his successors. But even they were unable to check the rising tide of banks and the increasing influence of finance capitalism. This economic trend overwhelmed the dogmas of the opposition.

The success of the Jeffersonians constituted a refutation of another of Adams' cherished principles. The party which achieved "moderation" did so as a political party. Adams' plan for an independent executive was an abstraction never achieved. In reality, the practice of Adams, as well as his personal choice of policies, was dictated all along by the wishes of the moderates.

3 (Fredericksburg, 1814.) Page proof was sent to Adams by Taylor as the book was in press. A copy of the final work is in Adams' library, as is Taylor's Arator.


5 Published in Works, VI, 445 et seq. Adams praised the Arator as the best American work on agriculture; to George Jeffreys, in American Farmer, II, 93; Simms, Henry H., Life of John Taylor (Richmond, 1932).

6 Cf. Boston Patriot, 1809 for Adams' letters reviewing his administration and also see Correspondence between John Adams and W. Cunningham, Esq. (Boston, 1823).
among whom he found his greatest support; but he was hardly conscious of this. Influenced by various writings on the British Constitution, Adams stated in his *Defense of American Constitutions* (1787) and other writings of the post-revolutionary period, that an independent executive was necessary. In this belief he followed the most widely accepted interpreters of the British system, including Montesquieu and De Lolme. He thought his independent executive was patterned after the British monarch. The rich and poor of the commonwealth would be represented in the Senate and House, respectively. The executive would hold the balance between these groups.

Actually this was a misinterpretation of the operation of the British parliamentary system. George III attempted such a role, but most effectively when acting through the existing parties. Moreover, the prime minister, head of the majority party and responsible to Parliament, exercised the executive power in fact. But the theory of the independent executive was a commonplace among members of the Constitutional Convention. Organized national political parties were not fully foreseen. Washington launched his administration under such a conception of the presidency, appointing his heads of departments from all factions, including both Jefferson and Hamilton in the original group. But before his second administration closed, this theory had been abandoned of necessity. His cabinet was a Federalist cabinet. The party was headed by Hamilton, even though Hamilton had left the cabinet for New York.

The trend in this direction is perfectly clear in the party press of the period. The *Aurora*, national organ of the Republicans, hailed Washington's retirement with delight. In 1799, when Washington was urged to run for a third term, among reasons he gave for declining was that he clearly saw the growth of parties had prevented universal acceptance of the President. The country would be no more united under him than under some other president, he maintained.

*Washington to John Trumbull, June 25, 1799, Writings* (Fitzpatrick, ed.), XXXVII, 279.
Adams was not as clear on the connection which had developed between the presidency and the parties by 1799 as was Washington. He still hoped, throughout his administration, for the President to be regarded as above party, as representing the national interest. At the same time, he sometimes acted on the opposite theory, that he needed to take steps to build a party interest around himself. This becomes the impression when one considers part of his plans and his relationship to Elbridge Gerry, Benjamin Rush, the Muhlenbergs, the Fenners, and others. Here he seemed to be trying to build a faction or party of his own, or to take over the Federalist party himself. But in the main, Adams acted on his theory of the independent executive.

The force which actually proved strongest in the development of American politics was the growth of parties. The authority of the President rested upon political power as represented by these parties. The question next arises, why did these parties grow up? The answer is found in terms of the economic, social, religious, cultural, and geographic influences of the period. These factors divided the people into divergent groups. These groups coalesced into two major combinations — the commercial (Federalist) and the agrarian (Republican). But the economic elements named are merely those which dominated in each party. A considerable portion of farmers who grew cash crops supported the Federalists until 1800 or shortly thereafter. Artisans in the cities were generally Republican. But once a stable central government was established, the dominance of agriculture in the American economy assured that the Jeffersonians would triumph if they could develop a moderate program. They did so. They drew off the middle class of farmers from the Federalists. They modified sufficiently their opposition to banks to assure a banking program for the expanding economy of the country. In contrast, Federalist policy, while ambitious, was designed increasingly for commercial groups alone. Except where some extraordinary factor like the Congregational Church entered, as it did in the state of Connecticut, this program was too extreme to hold the farm

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support to the party. The result was the split in policy in 1799-1800, peace with France, the election of Jefferson, the ultimate extinction of the Federalist party.

There is another matter of importance. With the growth of political parties an important extension of the principles of free speech and free press occurred. The idea of an opposition political party having the right to exist had necessarily received a set-back because of the strife between Whigs and Tories during the American Revolution. Civil war at home accompanied the war with England. With the growth of political parties under the new constitution there were two immediate dangers after 1789. One was that organized political parties might not be granted the right to exist. This danger was typified by the Alien and Sedition Laws. The other danger was that the splitting off process of the American Revolution might be continued, perhaps through the program possibly suggested by the Virginia and Kentucky Resolutions, or the secession plans of the extreme Federalists for New England.

But the constitutional government established, through the medium of political parties, proved capable of bringing the divergent groups representing political power into an adjustment with one another that was acceptable to the great majority. This was achieved through the legislative process. Protest and change came through the electoral process. To some degree Adams contributed to this. But his major contribution was probably not ideological, not his idea of an independent executive and a balance. His major contribution, instead, was made because he thought with the moderates. It was in that way that his great decision — peace with France, no foreign adventure, an end to domestic extremism — contributed greatly to the development of ultimate national well-being. He also contributed to the establishment of a peaceful method whereby change could take place within the framework of constitutional republican government, which ultimately became democratic government.

A question may be raised concerning the political leadership exercised by Adams. It has already been suggested that Jefferson came close, after his inaugural, to moulding together the rather
disparate groups which had opposed extreme Federalist policy. Had it been possible for Adams to follow, from 1797 on, the policy which he did after his break with the cabinet, he might have had a comparable reception. Honesty and forthrightness he had in abundance. He was motivated by an intense sense of trusteeship on behalf of his countrymen. In this respect he sought, like Washington, to be impartial. He stood against the extremists of his own party. But, impetuous in temperament, he lacked the ability of great political leaders like Jefferson and Lincoln to carry with him the groups necessary to political success. Probably from the Federalist position this could not have been done in any event. But Adams also lacked that characteristic of the great political leaders of the United States, the capacity to act as a mediator among groups and bring eventual agreement. Despite this, and despite his angry departure from Washington before the inauguration of his successor, his decisions in the period of critical relations with France were important in prolonging peace until the new United States government had reached a period of greater stability. Added to his service in the Revolution he could well feel that his contribution had been great.