Chapter 2
The Jeffersonian Foundation

Thomas Jefferson, with all his contradictions, or arguably precisely because of them, is at the heart of the American experience. That experience is full of complexity and ambiguity, but so was Jefferson. A recent summation suggests that his was a "life of paradox . . . A Virginia nationalist, a slaveholding *philosophe*, an aristocratic democrat, a provincial cosmopolitan, a pacific imperialist—the paradoxes, it seems clear, are of no ordinary variety, reaching far beyond the life of one man. They are as large in meaning and as portentous in significance as America itself."¹ And Henry Adams, though referring in this instance to Jefferson's visionary tendencies, had this same understanding of Jefferson as typifying American character. These qualities "seemed to be a national trait, for every one admitted that Jefferson's opinions, in one form or another, were shared by a majority of the American people."²

This, of course, is enough to make Jefferson, with all his contradictions, one of the central figures in American history. Jefferson is surely one of those to whom Martin Diamond referred when he wrote that the history of American politics is "the story of the American heritage and the fight among the heirs."³ And Henry Adams in his monumental *History* is surely one of the heirs who has contributed most to the debate on the meaning of Jefferson and Jeffersonianism.⁴

Adams on Jefferson's Character

Adams's views are characteristically complex, highly nuanced, and the cause of nearly as much debate as is his subject. His attitude toward Jefferson was less than transparent, but an explanation of its complexities reveals a great deal about the intricacies of his own thought.⁵ Sometimes the *History* has been called a pro-Federalist work, though Merrill Peterson, discussing this assessment, considers it unjust to Adams.⁶ Just as commonly it has been classified as anti-Federalist, though having made this point, Ernest Samuels quickly points out that Adams was unmerciful in his exposure of the failings of the Jeffersonians.⁷ William Jordy is unequivocal: "The *History* was viru-
lently anti-Federalist.” If we consider the great contest between Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton, it is clear that Adams, for all his criticisms of Jefferson, in no way sided with Hamilton. Indeed, it is obvious that Adams intensely disliked Hamilton, pursuing a feud that went back to great-grandfather John Adams, who was a political enemy of Hamilton’s and deplored his sexual morals as well. Adams comments on Hamilton’s Napoleonic tendencies—far from a compliment, in his view—and notes that he was “equally ready to support a system he utterly disbelieved in as one that he liked.” Such interpretive tension seems to support the conclusion of Peterson: “The admirers of the History from the day of its appearance to the present have been unable to agree whether it is Jeffersonian or anti-Jeffersonian. In truth, it is neither, and both at once, which is the secret of its endless fascination and the mark of its distinction in American historiography.”

First it is important to consider the possible extent of Adams’s psychological identification with Jefferson. Adams’s Jefferson was an enormously subtle, complex creature, surely qualities Adams would have wished attributed to himself. Here it is only necessary to recall his famous account of the difficulty of characterizing the Virginian (quoted in the introduction), where he stresses the extreme delicacy of touch required to capture Jefferson, qualities also necessary to capture Adams. And Jefferson the inveterate theorist might also have had an appeal, though one that had to be qualified. “His mind shared little in common with the provincialism on which the Virginia and Kentucky Resolutions were founded. His instincts led him to widen rather than narrow the bounds of every intellectual exercise.” Again, these are qualities not unlike Adams’s, though there were problems associated with this disposition, including a tendency to overgeneralize on the basis of superficial knowledge and his sense of omniscience, combined with a taste for radicalism, which, as we have seen, Adams sees as having Parisian roots. The last point seems to echo the common Federalist charge that Jefferson was dedicated to the revolutionary principles that led to the Terror, but in general, Adams’s analysis does not support this view, and he must surely have been charmed by the intellectualism that expanded the boundaries of any problem, a characteristic not far removed from his own style of thought. And one should recall Adams’s skepticism about the near-hysterical denunciations of all things French that were at the heart of Federalist attacks on Jefferson. Adams could be very hard on Jefferson, but not in the style of the High Federalists, whom he despised just as much as he did the most passionate Southern secessionists.

Finally there is this assessment of Jefferson’s personality:
His tastes were for that day excessively refined. His instincts were those of a liberal European nobleman. . . . The rawness of political life was an incessant torture to him, and personal attacks made him keenly unhappy. His true delight was in an intellectual life of science and art. . . . [He] fairly reveled in what he believed to be beautiful, and his writings often betrayed subtle feeling for artistic form—a sure sign of intellectual sensuousness. He shrank from whatever was rough or coarse, and his yearning for sympathy was almost feminine. That such a man should have ventured into the stormy ocean of politics was surprising, the more so because he was no orator.14

Surely Adams saw in all this a spirit similar to his own, though he himself was never able to down his distaste for the political life to the extent of his great subject. Though he made a few forays into independent politics following the Civil War, for Adams, the chosen path of influence was through the pen. And perhaps he thought that one way to exert that influence was through an analysis of the foundations of American society and politics, which is the subject of his account of the Jefferson and Madison administrations.

However, whatever affinity Adams may have had with Jefferson's persona, his views of his thought and politics are complex and even convoluted. Some of Jefferson's ideas clearly seemed to him to lead to disunion, or at least a weak state, conclusions that Adams could not endorse. At the same time, he clearly thought that Jefferson was altogether too ready to abandon the principles he professed to hold. The great paradox of Adams's thought is that he disapproved of Jefferson's principles and then chastised him for setting them aside in favor of policies that moved in the nationalist direction supported by Adams and his entire clan. There is a major tension at work here that may be a key to the complexity of vision described by Merrill Peterson.15 And yet, for all his animadversions against Jefferson and his colleagues, it is hard to escape the conclusion that Adams's final estimate is positive:

As their scheme existed in the minds of Mr. Jefferson, Mr. Gallatin, and Mr. Madison, it was as broad as society itself, and aimed at providing for and guiding the moral and material development of a new era,—a new race of men. . . . They failed, and although their failure was due partly to accident, it was due chiefly to the fact that they put too high an estimate upon human nature. . . . Yet, whatever may have been the extent of their defeat or of their successes, one fact stands out in strong relief on the pages of American history. Except those theories of government which are popularly represented by the names of Hamilton and Jefferson, no solution of the great problems
of American politics has ever been offered to the American people. Since the day when foreign violence and domestic faction prostrated Mr. Gallatin and his two friends, no statesman has ever appeared with the strength to bend their bow, — to finish their uncompleted task.¹⁶

The First Inaugural Address

For Adams, the place to begin an analysis of Jefferson’s thought was the First Inaugural Address of 1801.¹⁷ This once popular document was now, he felt, unduly neglected, though it needed to be supplemented by other documents in order to have a full grasp of Jefferson’s program. But time had not diminished the importance of the address, though Adams hints that the years may have imparted to it meanings not intended by the author.¹⁸ Jefferson’s first goal was political; that is, he wanted to calm the anxieties of his opponents, particularly the more extreme Federalists. It was to them that Jefferson spoke when he proclaimed that “every difference of opinion is not a difference of principle. We are all Republicans, we are all Federalists.”¹⁹ But, Adams comments, Jefferson did not—indeed, could not—really mean this, and in suggesting that he was in any way a Federalist, Jefferson did himself an “injustice.” Any real harmony, Jefferson felt, would result from his own further triumph.²⁰ Thus Adams initially appears to take seriously Jefferson’s private claim that the election of 1800 was a true peaceful revolution.

Whatever Federalists might fear, there was no doubt that republican government could be as strong as any on earth. And the implication that heretofore the Federalist administration had kept the new nation strong and free was a true compliment coming from one not accustomed to praising his opponents.²¹ But fortunately, Americans had advantages in the effort to meet their challenges. A “wise and frugal government” restricted to keeping the peace would be up to the task. At this point, Adams observes, Jefferson launched into his only public gloss on the principles of republicanism beyond those suggested in the Virginia and Kentucky Resolutions. The text is sometimes problematic and even somewhat startling. Equal justice for all; peace, friendship, and commerce with all nations but no “entangling alliances”; states’ rights, but with the preservation of the general government; the preservation of the right of election; “absolute acquiescence in the decisions of the majority”; a well-regulated militia; civil supremacy over the military; a frugal government, as already noted, the encouragement of agriculture; and the preservation of what are commonly called the First Amendment freedoms are the basic principles of republicanism.²²
For the most part, none of this is strikingly original; indeed, they were the principles of President Washington and would have occasioned little notice had they been uttered by a Federalist. Coming from Jefferson, the words sounded a little unfamiliar, and “certain phrases seemed even out of place.” The most notable statement is the flat enunciation of the doctrine of absolute majoritarianism. Coming from one whose bedrock principles were stated in the Virginia and Kentucky Resolutions, this was indeed startling. As Adams says, “No principle was so strongly entwined in the roots of Virginia republicanism as that which affirmed the worthlessness of decisions made by a majority of the United States, either as a nation or a confederacy, in matters which concerned the exercise of doubtful power.” The central point of the resolutions was the first statement of the doctrine of nullification. The Jeffersonians were emphatically not majoritarians where the national government was concerned. They held “that freedom could be maintained only by preserving inviolate the right of every State to judge for itself what was, and what was not, lawful for a majority to decide.” And Adams might have observed, though he did not, that the First Amendment guarantees listed by Jefferson are opposed to majoritarian domination. Nor, of course, was Jefferson a simple majoritarian even at the level of the state legislature. Power must be divided to prevent majority abuses. As he put it in the Notes on Virginia, “It will be no alleviation that these powers will be exercised by a plurality of hands, and not by a single one. 173 despots would surely be as oppressive as one. . . . An elective despotism was not the government we fought for.”

And, Adams asks, in light of these ideas, what could it mean to pledge the preservation of the full vigor of the general government? A “bottomless gulf” divided the two parties in their constitutional theories. Still, until Federalist precedents had been explicitly repealed, they had to be treated as acts of the majority, even when in serious violation of Jeffersonian doctrine. How, for example, could Jefferson promise to preserve the powers assumed in the Alien and Sedition Acts, and how, given his deep distrust of the judiciary, could the Judiciary Act of 1789 go unchallenged? Surely, Adams contends, Jefferson did not literally mean what he said. Rather, “he meant no more than to preserve the general government in such vigor as in his opinion was Constitutional, without regard to Federalist precedents; but his words were equivocal, and unless they were to be defined by legislation, they identified him with the contrary legislation of his predecessors.” But such legislation never appeared. The Alien and Sedition Acts were simply allowed to expire rather than being challenged on principle, and the Judiciary Act was untouched even when the Republicans clearly had the power to repeal it. Thus Jefferson almost seemed
anxious to prove that the revolution he proclaimed in private had not in fact occurred. In public, he preached a theory of consensus in which Federalists and Republicans became virtually one. In private, he harped on the theme that the Federalists were monarchists at heart. Indeed, fear of monarchy was a lifelong obsession on his part.

The issue of monarchy raises another question. How do we classify Jefferson’s own views on the forms of government, and, indeed, how do we classify those of Henry Adams? As we have seen, in Adams’s view, “Jefferson and his Southern friends took power as republicans opposed to monarchists, not as democrats opposed to oligarchy. Jefferson was not in a social sense a democrat, and was called so only as a term of opprobrium. His Northern followers were in the main democrats, but he and most of his Southern partisans claimed to be republicans, opposed by secret monarchists.” Thus Jefferson saw a three-way conflict among Southern republicans, Northern democrats, and Federalist monarchists. Like the Puritans before him, whom he despised and doubtless misunderstood, he hoped to offer to the world an example, in his case, one of a decentralized, nonmonarchical republic. Centralization was the enemy, and in it he saw nothing democratic. The model he wished to establish was an enlarged Virginia dedicated to agriculture, with commerce as a handmaid and with manufactures and large cities discouraged. Finally, banking must be recognized as a great villain; indeed, banks were “more dangerous than standing armies,” involving a swindle of the future. These ideas, Adams comments, were “republican in the Virginia sense, but not democratic; they had nothing in common with the democracy of Pennsylvania and New England, except their love of freedom; and Virginia freedom was not the same conception as the democratic freedom of the North.”

Adams does not elaborate on this point, but there can be no doubt that this is a none-too-veiled reference to Southern slavery, a major preoccupation for generations in the Adams family. Nor can there be any doubt that Adams sided with the New England democrats.

However, Adams does not take an overt position on these forms of government at this stage in his argument. Bear in mind that for all his judgmental qualities, he was still presenting his work as scientific history. Still, his position is not hard to discern. He clearly despised the High Federalists, who were old family enemies, for being as willing to destroy the Union as were the most passionate states’ rights Southerners. The Jeffersonian principles were also seriously flawed, and we are left to recall his warm feelings for the Northern democrats, particularly the Pennsylvanians, which he expressed in his brilliant analysis of the United States at the start of the nineteenth cen-
tury. And we will see at the conclusion of the great History the extent to which the people as a whole emerge as the collective hero of his epic, often in spite of the ineptitude of their leaders. These are the marks of a writer whose sympathy for the ordinary citizens of American democracy is often underrated, while his distrust of all the organized political positions is deep.

A few more features of Adams's perception of the essentials of Jeffersonianism are important. The great danger to Jefferson's minimalist utopia was foreign war. His foreign policy was intimately connected to commerce. One of his deep beliefs was that Europe required peace and free trade with America. A properly regulated international trade provided "the machinery for doing away with navies, armies, and war." Except for commerce, Americans should distance themselves from other nations. In Jefferson's theory of the Constitution, the states were to be independent in all things within themselves, but united in facing foreign nations. Thus, he wrote, "The federal is in truth our foreign government, which department alone is taken from the sovereignty of the separate states." To Adams, these views show why Jefferson saw his rise to power as a true revolution. "His view of governmental functions was simple and clearly expressed. The national government, as he conceived it, was a foreign department as independent from the domestic, which belonged to the States, as though they were governments of different nations." Foreign policy was to be conducted by commercial restrictions, which he saw as a form of "peaceable coercion." And he added, "Our commerce is so valuable to them that they will be glad to purchase it, when the only price we ask is to do us justice."

These, then, are Jefferson's principles, as Adams saw them. The History was explicitly designed to show how and with what success they were applied.

Jefferson, the Louisiana Purchase, and the Executive Power

We can examine only a small part of Adams's massive study. I focus primarily, though not exclusively, on one great event from each term; the Louisiana Purchase from the first term, and the embargo from the second. Here we can see great success and enormous failure, combined sometimes with startling flexibility and sometimes with equally amazing inflexibility of principle.

First the flexibility. Republican ideology called for Jefferson to mount a frontal challenge to the Federalist-dominated judiciary. The Judiciary Act of 1789, a triumph of Federalist centralization, as Adams called it, had effectively made the state courts subordinate to the Supreme Court in cases in
which the powers of the general government were at stake. The Judiciary Act of 1801, the last gasp of the Federalist administration, had increased the size of the judiciary and had created the circuit courts as a new level of the judicial system. Clearly the former was more threatening to the states, but it was the latter that Jefferson chose to attack.\footnote{37} It was not that Jefferson was unaware of the heart of the problem. He knew that the Federalists “have retired into the judiciary as a stronghold,” an allusion to the famous midnight judicial appointments of John Adams as he was leaving office.\footnote{38} In his annual message of 1801, Jefferson proposed that the new courts did not have enough business and were hence unnecessary and therefore improper in constitutional terms. Moreover, they were uneconomical, and the act of 1801 should be repealed. The Federalists argued on the slightly higher ground that since judges were to hold their offices during good behavior, to abolish the courts was a violation of that principle. In any case, the debate, though often bitter, was conducted on what Adams pointed out was substantially a technical issue. The opportunity for a principled debate was lost. Though some came close to the edge, no true democrat argued for an elected judiciary or one that could be removed by the legislative branch. This would have been in no way improper, Adams comments somewhat surprisingly, and the Federalists greatly feared such a system, but in the end, the Virginians were timid, to their great cost in the long run.\footnote{39}

Jefferson’s timidity was in some ways characteristic, although, given his forceful action in the acquisition of Louisiana and the imposition of the embargo, Adams may have exaggerated this point to a significant degree. Interestingly, it is during the discussion of the judiciary debate that Adams makes his famous remark about the need to portray Jefferson ever so subtly, touch by touch. Above all, he makes clear, Jefferson was not simply a dogmatic ideologue; there was never anything simple about Thomas Jefferson. Thus, Adams agrees with Alexander Hamilton when he said, “Nor is it true that Jefferson is zealot enough to do anything in pursuance of his principles which will contravene his popularity or his interest. He is as likely as any man I know to temporize, to calculate what will be likely to promote his own reputation and advantage; and the probable result of such a temper is the preservation of systems, though originally opposed, which, being once established, could not be overturned without danger to the person who did it. To my mind, a true estimate of Mr. Jefferson’s character warrants the expectation of a temporizing rather than a violent system.”\footnote{40}

But Jefferson left Republican principles behind in pursuit of policies in which his actions, while perhaps conscience stricken, were extremely bold.
When he felt the need to act, he did not temporize. And sometimes, Adams believed, principles were abandoned because Jefferson was moved by forces beyond his control. “Honest as Jefferson undoubtedly was in his wish to diminish executive influence,” Adams writes, “the task was beyond his powers.”

Paradoxically, this was in part a result of the weakness of the congressional Republicans. The Northern Jeffersonians could provide votes but no leadership. They lacked the habit of command and tended to fall back on the wishes of upper-class Virginians and New Yorkers. “[Congressmen] were thrust aside with more or less civility by their leaders, partly because they were timid, but chiefly because they were unable to combine under the lead of one among themselves.”

John Marshall sensed what proved to be the dynamic of executive-legislative relations. He predicted that Jefferson would “embody himself in the House of Representatives, and by weakening the office of President” would “increase his personal power. He will . . . become the leader of that party which is about to constitute the majority of the legislature.” Thus, according to Edward Corwin, Jefferson was the first example of a president who is primarily a party leader and only secondarily an executive.

Jefferson’s control over his party no doubt stood him in good stead in the drama of the Louisiana Purchase. The purchase itself was of dubious constitutionality, a fact that Jefferson fully realized. To deviate from the Constitution on such a matter was to place Jefferson’s deepest principles at risk. As Adams tells us, “The principle of strict construction was the breath of Jefferson’s] political life. The Pope could as safely trifle with the doctrine of apostolic succession as Jefferson with the limits of executive power.”

As Jefferson dramatically put it, “I had rather ask an enlargement of power from the nation, where it is found necessary, than to assume it by a construction which would make our powers boundless. Our peculiar security is in the possession of a written Constitution. Let us not make it a blank paper by construction.” Thus Jefferson’s first thought was to amend the Constitution to legitimate the Louisiana Purchase when the great opportunity presented by the French arose.

But Jefferson was fully prepared to run these constitutional risks if necessary. The dangers he saw were remote and, as Adams remarked, he believed that the leadership he exerted was based on sympathy and love rather than command. Moreover, as Adams wryly comments, “there was never a time when he thought that resistance to the will of his party would serve the great ends he had in view.” Perhaps it is not surprising that immediately after expressing his fear of the destruction of the Constitution, Jefferson went on to add, “If, however, our friends shall think differently, certainly I shall acquiesce
with satisfaction, confiding that the good sense of our country will correct the evil of construction when it shall produce ill effects."46

Thus Jefferson and Madison embarked on a course that Jefferson himself believed would make blank paper of the Constitution and, at the same time, effectively tore up the Virginia and Kentucky Resolutions; unsurprisingly, their followers were no more principled than their leaders.47 The result of the congressional debates was a foregone conclusion. Federalists and Republicans alike agreed that the United States had the right to acquire new territory by either conquest or treaty. The parties differed only on whether Louisiana belonged to the central government or to the states. The Federalists held that the territory could be governed as a colony but could not be admitted into the Union without the consent of the states. The Republicans thought that the new territory could be so admitted or otherwise disposed of, but that neither the people nor the states had anything to say about the matter. "At bottom," Adams continues,

both doctrines were equally fatal to the old status of the Union.... The Federalist theory was one of Empire, the Republican was one of assimilation; but both agreed that the moment had come when the old Union must change its character. Whether the government at Washington could possess Louisiana as a colony or admit it as a State, was a difference of no great matter if the cession were to hold good; the essential point was that for the first time in the national history all parties agreed in admitting that the government could govern."48

This last point is in some ways an astonishing comment and requires further analysis.

However, before turning to this, there is another dimension of Louisiana politics that requires consideration. What powers did Congress hold over the newly acquired territory? The first possibility was to adopt a constitutional amendment admitting Louisiana to the Union—in effect, to follow Jefferson's first instinct. However, the Republicans feared casting doubt on the legality of the purchase, and the Northern Democrats cared little for Southern theoretical dogmas. Moreover, the Southern Republicans were jealous of central authority but were also, in general, "impatient of control and unused to self-restraint." In addition, counting as they did on their own goodwill, they saw no need for a curb on their power. Only Senator John Quincy Adams suggested such an amendment. James Madison demurred, and though Adams persisted, he was denied even the courtesy of a referral to com-
committee for his proposal. This was the end of any talk about incorporating Louisiana by constitutional amendment.*

What followed was an act described by Adams as “an act of sovereignty so despotic as the corresponding acts of France and Spain. Jefferson and his party had annexed to the Union a foreign people and a vast territory, which profoundly altered the relations of the States and the character of their nationality.” Federalists complained that the bill introduced pursuant to these positions gave unconstitutional powers to the president, while John Randolph, the great apostle of states’ rights, defended it on grounds of necessity and argued that with respect to the new territory, the United States “possessed the powers of European sovereignty.” 50 A territorial government was then created “in which the people of Louisiana were to have no say,” pursuant to a bill introduced by Senator John Breckinridge, but probably drafted by Madison in consultation with the president. 51 Senator Adams, continuing in his role as gadfly, introduced three resolutions to the effect that no constitutional authority existed, in a familiar phrase, to tax Louisianans without their consent, but he was able to win only three supporters for his position. 52 Through these acts, his grandson acerbically observed, “Louisianans received a government in which its people, who had been solemnly promised all the rights of American citizens, were set apart, not as citizens, but as subjects, lower in the political scale than the meanest tribes of Indians, whose right to self-government was never questioned.” 53

For Adams, the effects of these actions on American constitutionalism were enormous. And on this subject, his air of historical detachment largely vanishes. There is still historical analysis, but perhaps because John Quincy Adams appears as an actor who can help speak for the family, Henry allows himself the luxury of direct criticism, partly stripped of irony. This reveals some of his deepest political impulses, though on close examination, those impulses are more complex than they appear at first and are perhaps tinged with some ambivalence. “A government competent to interpret its own powers so liberally in one instance,” he writes, “could hardly resist any strong temptation to do so in others. The doctrines of ‘strict construction’ could not be considered as the doctrines of the government after they had been abandoned in this leading case by a government controlled by strict constructionists.” 54

This is arguably true enough, but then the argument takes a rather odd turn. Adams points out that in the Dred Scott case, whose basic holding Adams could not have endorsed, Justice Taney and his colleagues reviewed the acts surrounding the Louisiana Purchase and found them constitutionally wanting.
Territory might be acquired, argued Taney, but it could not be governed as a colony by a Congress possessing absolute authority. The central government cannot assume "despotic" powers that have been denied it by the Constitution. The clear implication is that in Taney's view, "all the Louisiana legislation was unconstitutional."55

In any event, the government, Adams contends, was changing profoundly, and he suggests an interpretation of American history claiming that "the government had at some time been converted from a government of delegated powers into a sovereignty."56 In defending the Louisiana Treaty, Jefferson, writing to Breckinridge, who had introduced the Kentucky Resolution on his behalf, proposed an "appeal to the nation" and went on to add, "We shall not be disavowed by the nation, and their act of indemnity will confirm and not weaken the Constitution by more strongly marking out its lines."57 Adams notices that Jefferson underscored the word nation, that ominous phrase, as he calls it. But this requires notice, because the word nation was unknown to the Constitution. Invariably the term used was Union, and of course, in the Virginian theory, Congress could not appeal to the nation at all, except in the sense of a nation of states.58 What was occurring seemed to confirm what the anti-Federalists had feared—that the Constitution contained a centralizing dynamic.59 The strange thing was that this dynamic was being furthered by Thomas Jefferson, in theory an avowed opponent of this tendency.

Justice Taney seems an odd ally for Adams in his critique of Jefferson's constitutional practices. Adams cannot have been comfortable in league with the author of Dred Scott, the most reviled decision in the history of the Supreme Court. But Taney is not alone in the ranks of strange bedfellows. In pursuing the idea that "the government had at some time been converted from a government of delegated powers into a sovereignty," Adams turns to John C. Calhoun in his "Address to the People of the Slave-holding States." There Calhoun declared, "The one great evil, from which all other evils have flowed, is the overthrow of the Constitution of the United States. The government of the United States is no longer the government of confederated republics, but of a consolidated democracy. It is no longer a free government, but a despotism."60

Adams is quick to point out the irony inherent in this strange statement. If even the strict constructionists believed that such an important change in the structure of American constitutionalism had occurred, then the only event in American history of sufficient magnitude to have brought it about
was the Louisiana Purchase, of which the strict constructionists were the authors. Adams’s critical summary is devastating and provocative:

Even in 1804 the political consequences of the act were already too striking to be overlooked. Within three years of his inauguration Jefferson bought a foreign colony without its consent and against its will, annexed it to the United States by an act which he said made blank paper of the Constitution; and then he who had found his predecessors too monarchical and the Constitution too liberal in powers, . . . made himself monarch of the new territory and wielded over it, against its protests, the powers of its old kings. Such an experience was final; no century of slow and half-understood experience could be needed to prove that the hopes of humanity lay thenceforward, not in attempting to restrain the government from doing whatever the majority should think necessary, but in raising the people themselves till they should think nothing necessary but what was good.61

The rhetoric here is strong, and no one can doubt that Adams sees the Louisiana Purchase and the methods by which it was accomplished as a profound turning point in American history. He is revolted by the thought of absolute sovereign power unchecked by constitutional limitations, and his concern for the democratic rights of the people of the Louisiana Territory helps make the point that Adams was not the sour critic of democracy he is often portrayed as being. However, when his love of irony leads him to adopt the interpretation of American constitutionalism of Taney and Calhoun, he is aligning himself, however temporarily, with exponents of positions he detested. Surely he might better have paused to note the absurdity of Calhoun’s claim that the United States had become not free but a “consolidated democracy.” But of course, Adams knew that as long as slavery endured, a claim that the nation was any sort of democracy was untenable.62 And he also cannot have endorsed the conclusions of the Dred Scott decision. He is using Taney and Calhoun to show that it was the defenders of states’ rights that undermined their own position. This is, as I say, a temporary if perhaps slightly dangerous liaison.

But of course, this was a position he rejected as subversive of the Union, just as he rejected the secessionist leanings of Federalist extremists, the ancient political enemies of the Adams family. And certainly, nationalist that he was, he approved of the acquisition of the vast Louisiana Territory, though he would have preferred that it be ratified by a constitutional amendment.
Thus he agreed with the most basic result of Jefferson's policy, while, at the same time, in an access of residual Puritanism, he rejected what he took to be the completely unprincipled methods by which the policy was achieved. But it should be said that the whole episode suggests the fragility of law when it conflicts with the perceived necessities of politics. This is an analysis that points to Adams's later emphasis on the dynamics of power and his sense of the declining force of principled action.

It is important to remember Adams's analysis of the bipartisan agreement on the basic need for the purchase, which indicated that for the first time all parties agreed that the nation could in fact be governed. It is difficult to believe that Adams did not join in this agreement. The very language of his discussion is approving. If this meant the end of the Union as it had existed, then so be it. The clear implication of Adams's position is that government under the original Union was impossible. A nation destined for greatness must be governable. Thus, in spite of the undermining of constitutional niceties, the end result was desirable. It also follows that the original Constitution, in spite of Adams's apparent obeisance to it, was not viable. This, in turn, is consistent with the earlier point about the tendency of expediency to triumph over law. The way was open for a democratic nation as opposed to a union of states, many of them disfigured by slavery and secessionist impulses. None of this is clearly stated, given Adams's surface commitment to a form of positivist history, but the implications are clear. Earl Harbert is right to say that, for Adams, no account of Southern politics in terms of Jeffersonian Republican principle was possible, because each principle could be abandoned if a "special case" like the opportunity to purchase Louisiana should arise. The older Adamses tended to obsolescence in clinging to their principles in a time of rapid change, while Jefferson and Madison became pragmatists avant le lettre. To a substantial extent, Henry Adams, however uncomfortably, was willing to join them. Given the difficulties of making a system based on an extreme notion of states' rights work, it is hard to disagree. Most of American history moves along this line of development.

Finally, Adams's emphasis on raising people to the point that they sought only what was good is also of great theoretical importance. As J. C. Levenson suggests, one thing Adams held against Jefferson was his failure as a political educator. Adams thought that for Jefferson, "to have dropped the political theory of 1798 without constructing another in its place thus became an offence, not simply against the demands of rationality, but against the democratic principle." Adams certainly did not mourn the passing of the principles of 1798, but he did wish for new justificatory principles. This reading
lends support to the interpretation that Adams was one of the last of the civic republicans. Certainly he hoped for a citizenry focused on the public good, a point he was to explore more fully in his didactic novel *Democracy*. My own reading is that the amalgam of Adams's thought is more complex and more modern than that, but surely there are lingering elements of the older ideology in his thinking. And finally, it is characteristically and appropriately ironic that Jefferson, the inveterate theorist, is accused by Adams of theoretical failure just when theory is most needed.

The nature of the theoretical failure should be further discussed. John P. Diggins makes much of a wonderful story recounted by Adams in the *Education*. When Adams was a six-year-old, he resisted going to school. His mother was about to give in when John Quincy Adams emerged in all his stern majesty from his library, took the recalcitrant boy by the hand, and, without saying a word, marched him the one mile to school. Adams comments that Locke and Rousseau must be revised, because here was an exercise of authority that did not stem from consent but rather from something, as Diggins puts it, "directly experienced without mediation of the reflective mind." There is indeed such a form of authority, and Grandfather Adams certainly had it; as described, this sounds very much like a version of personal authority, akin to charisma, and surely based on force of personality blended with the traditional and legal authority theorized by Max Weber. But there is at least one other form of authority, and this seems to be what Adams is getting at in the *History*. Authority can stem from the leader's ability to give good reasons for his actions, so as to persuade citizens of the legitimacy of their deeds. This is what Adams claims Jefferson conspicuously failed to do in his actions surrounding the Louisiana Purchase—a critical failing in a democratic leader, because it is possible to rely on personal force for just so long within the framework of a democratic system. Beyond that, the ability to make arguments, to give reasons that help establish legitimacy, is a vital need.

The Embargo and the Failure of Principle

If we leave questions of theory and principle aside, then the successful purchase of Louisiana was surely the major policy triumph of Jefferson's first term. Just as surely, the failed policy of the embargo dominated the second term. Almost as if a great triumph was the necessary prelude to disaster, the embargo followed Jefferson's enormous victory in the election of 1804, just when it appeared that Republicanism was everywhere in near-total control.

With the purchase, Jefferson felt that he was in "the harvest season of his
life. His theories were proved sound, his system of government stood in successful rivalry with that of Bonaparte and Pitt; and he felt no doubt that his friendship was as vital to England, France, and Spain as all the armies and navies of the world. Of course, this delight was premature, but it was certainly understandable. As Adams writes:

Rarely was a Presidential election better calculated to turn the head of a President, and never was a President elected who felt more keenly the pleasure of his personal triumph. At the close of four years of administration, all Jefferson's hopes were fulfilled. He had annihilated opposition. The slanders of the Federalist press helped to show that he was the idol of four fifths of the nation. He received one hundred and sixty-two of one hundred and seventy-six electoral votes, while in 1801 he had but seventy-three in one hundred and thirty-eight; and in the Ninth Congress, which was to meet in December, 1805, barely seven out of thirty-four senators, and twenty-five out of one hundred and forty-one representatives, would oppose his will. He described his triumph, in language studiously modest, in a letter to Volney: "The two parties which prevailed with so much violence when you were here are almost wholly melted into one."

In such a setting, Jefferson might well have thought that the consensus he pretended already existed in his Inaugural Address had actually arrived and on his own terms, just as he had hoped. This was the form Jefferson liked opposition to take. As Adams remarks with characteristic acerbity, "Jefferson resembled all rulers in one peculiarity of mind. Even Bonaparte thought a respectable minority might be useful as censors; but neither Bonaparte nor Jefferson was willing to agree that any particular minority was respectable." But Jefferson's joy was based partly on illusion. Like so many leaders, he had convinced himself that his admirable situation was permanent, particularly since he was surrounded by flatterers who would offer him no challenge, while the electoral triumph outweighed even the subtlest flattery. No one, says Adams, dared question the means by which his popularity was achieved. No one spoke of states' rights or strict construction except the "monarchical Federalists, who were fit inmates for an asylum."

Yet again Adams returns to his main theme. "After nearly four years of Executive authority more complete than had ever been known in American history, Jefferson could see in himself and in his principles only a negation of Executive influence. What had become of the old radical division of parties . . . ? In this fusion his own party had shown even more willingness than
its opponents to mix its principles in a useful, but not noble, amalgam." This is a politics based on illusion and self-deception, and of course it did not last. No such politics can. Still, it must be repeated that while Adams saw through the illusions and the betrayal of principle, in his own guarded way, behind the constitutional jeremiads, he accepted the utility of what Jefferson had done, even while denying it any quality of nobility.

But the ironies continue to accumulate, for in the crisis over the embargo on foreign trade, Jefferson followed Republican dogma in the most principled possible way, with results that were disastrous for his personal popularity and the nation's economy. "The essence and genius of Jefferson's statesmanship," Adams writes, "lay in peace. Through difficulties, trials, and temptations of every kind he held fast to this idea, which was the clue to whatever seemed inconsistent, feeble, or deceptive in his administration." He firmly believed that European nations, particularly Britain, could be controlled through the exercise of America's growing commercial power. "Jefferson felt sure that England could not afford to sacrifice a trade of some forty million dollars, and that her colonies could not exist without access to the American market. What need to spend millions on a navy, when Congress, as Jefferson believed, already grasped England by the throat, and could suffocate her by a mere turn of the wrist?"

Apparently this was not as clear to the English as it was to Jefferson. As Adams sees it, in European affairs, America was little more than an appendage to England. Almost all the manufactured products consumed by Americans were British. English ships blockaded New York and Chesapeake Bay; they were impressing American seamen and interfering with French and Spanish commerce, all with little regard for American dignity. Perhaps worst of all was the Chesapeake affair, in which the British man-of-war Leopard fired on the American frigate Chesapeake, producing for the first time in American history, as Adams sees it, a truly national emotion, though it has to be added that the emotion proved to be impermanent.

But in spite of this event, Jefferson continued to have faith in his theory of peaceable coercion, to the extent that Adams believes "that he would hardly have thought his administrative career complete, had he quitted office without being allowed to prove the value of his plan." One of the early fruits of his policy was the Non-Importation Act of 1806, which, taking effect in December over the protests of the merchants, banned the import of all articles from Britain. Two days after the law went into effect, Madison received a document dated October 17, in which the king issued a proclamation requiring British naval vessels to exercise the right of impressment over neutral
merchant ships.\textsuperscript{79} A precedent dating from 1794 suggested the imposition of an embargo for a short, fixed period—thirty to ninety days at most—which would have allowed time to ascertain British and French intent. Jefferson responded to the king with a draft embargo message addressed to Congress. Madison offered a revision that skirted around the fact, ignored by Jefferson, that the official British impressment proclamation had not been received, but a proposal by Secretary of the Treasury Gallatin that the embargo be limited in time was ignored.\textsuperscript{80}

The message was quickly sent to Congress, where it was just as quickly passed by an overwhelming majority that included J. Q. Adams of Massachusetts, a vote later used against him by his Federalist enemies in his home state. The House then conducted its debate in secret session, an unfortunate fact, since “no private citizen ever knew the reasons which Congress considered sufficient to warrant a strain of the Constitution so violent as a permanent embargo implied.” The bill passed overwhelmingly.\textsuperscript{81}

Once again, Adams allows himself the luxury of open criticism, a criticism that gives a sense of his understanding of democracy:

Thus the embargo was imposed; and of all President Jefferson’s feats of political management, this was probably the most dextrous. On his mere recommendation, without warning, discussion, or publicity, and in silence as to his true reasons and motives, he succeeded in fixing upon the country, beyond recall, the experiment of peaceable coercion. His triumph was almost a marvel; but no one could fail to see its risks. A free people required to know in advance the motive which actuated government, and the intended consequences of important laws. Large masses of intelligent men were slow to forgive what they might call deception. If Jefferson’s permanent embargo should fail to coerce Europe, what would the people of America think of the process by which it had been fastened upon them? What would be said and believed of the President who had challenged so vast a responsibility.\textsuperscript{82}

This case is clearly different from the Louisiana situation. Here, Jefferson held to his republican principles on the immediate question, though he violated basic concepts of democratic theory, to use a term Adams does not, in pursuing them. And here too, Adams returns to the theme of his analysis of the Louisiana Purchase: a government that does not explain the principles underlying its actions threatens to undercut its own legitimacy. This theoretical failure is arguably worse to Adams than the disastrous policy or the de-
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The effective principle on which it rests. This is the view of a man who takes democratic principles seriously.

However, also unlike the Louisiana case, where the policy was a success, in the embargo controversy, the policy itself proved to be a huge mistake. But in spite of the fact that Jefferson, in the pursuit of his policy, “trampled upon personal rights and public principles” in the belief that “a higher public interest required the sacrifice,” Adams somewhat oddly concedes that the embargo was “an experiment in politics well worth making.” Implicitly, then, it was useful to learn that the policy of peaceful coercion as a substitute for war, intended to spare the United States the evils that had disfigured European history, would not work. A sense of international realism had to be learned the hard way.

In an irony that no doubt pleased Adams, the Republican dread of war stemmed not so much from its waste and destruction as from the effects war would have on the institutions of government, which led Jefferson to pursue a policy more destructive to “the theory and practice of a Virginia republic than any foreign war was likely to be.” And Adams adds, “Personal liberties and rights of property were more directly curtailed in the United States by embargo than in Great Britain by centuries of almost continuous foreign war. . . . If American liberties must perish, they might as well be destroyed by war as be stilled by non-intercourse.”

The economic costs were somewhat more difficult to measure. However, Adams contends in a brief and somewhat speculative analysis that, “If long continued, embargo must bankrupt the government almost as certainly as war; if not long continued, the immediate shock to industry was more destructive than war would have been.”

But in Adams’s worldview, the moral cost was greater than the economic cost. The brutality of war corrupts and debauches society, but “the peaceable coercion which Jefferson tried to substitute for war was less brutal, but hardly less mischievous than the evil it displaced.” Of course, the impact of “brute force and brutal methods corrupted and debauched society.” But beyond that:

The embargo opened the sluice-gates of social corruption. Every citizen was tempted to evade or defy the laws. At every point along the coast and frontier the civil, military, and naval services were brought in contact with corruption; while every man in private life was placed under strong motives to corrupt. Every article produced or consumed in the country became an object of speculation; every form of industry became a form of gambling. The rich could alone
profit in the end; while the poor must sacrifice at any loss the little they could produce.\(^{87}\)

Adams then adds a comment that is especially interesting in light of the still recent Civil War. Perhaps it is the remark of a victor not likely to be uttered in the South, perhaps the product of a romantic, almost medieval, somewhat European sense of the costs and benefits of war, and certainly it is the thought of a thinker briefly under the influence of Darwinism.

If war made men brutal, at least it made them strong; it called out the qualities best fitted to survive in the struggle for existence. To risk life for one's country was no mean act even when done for selfish motives; and to die that others might more happily live was the highest act of self-sacrifice to be reached by man. War, with all its horrors, could purify as well as debase; it dealt with high motives and vast interests; taught courage, discipline, and stern sense of duty. Jefferson must have asked himself in vain what lessons of heroism or duty were taught by his system of peaceable coercion.\(^{88}\)

No doubt Adams is at least partly right about the usually deeply hidden but perhaps sometimes salutary effects of war. Still, in the twenty-first century, it is much harder to praise them than it was for Adams. Had he written after the horrors of World War I, perhaps he would have been more reserved on the subject.\(^{89}\)

Though the constitutional, economic, and moral damage of the embargo was great, it was perhaps surpassed by the political carnage it left in its wake. Oddly, though Adams admits that the economic cost of the embargo was hard to calculate, most of his assessment of its political damage is based on its economic impact on the different sections of the country. For instance, it struck like a thunderbolt in New England, "where foreign commerce and shipping were the life of the people" and "the ocean," as Pickering said, "was their farm." But in spite of that, the region was better able than most to withstand the rigors of the embargo, and in fact, the Northeast emerged with a monopoly on the market for domestic manufacturing. Pennsylvania also felt a similar economic stimulus, and as a result, the embargo was less unpopular there than elsewhere. Wheat and livestock growers in the middle states were more damaged as the market for their products collapsed. Ironically, the states that were hit hardest were in the South, especially in Virginia. Embargo or not, "Four hundred thousand Negro slaves must be clothed and fed, great establishments must be kept up, the social scale of living could not be
reduced, and even bankruptcy could not clear a large landed estate without creating new encumbrances in a country where land and Negroes were the only forms of property on which money could be raised."

The description of the economic havoc may not seem an adequate justification for the political upheaval that followed, but upheaval there was. Jefferson, Madison, and the Southern Republicans had no idea of the consequences of their policy. Jefferson woke from his dream to find his political fortunes in ruins. In the contemporary parlance, he and his collaborators were clueless: "Except in a state of society verging on primitive civilization, the stoppage of all foreign intercourse could not have been attempted by peaceable means. The attempt to deprive the laborer of sugar, salt, tea, coffee, molasses, and rum; to treble the price of every yard of coarse cottons and woolens; to reduce by one half the wages of labor, and to double its burdens,—this was a trial more severe than war."

In the South, few were prepared to oppose a system that was so much a Southern invention, but in the North, there was a political conflagration, one of the early victims of which was John Quincy Adams, who paid the price for his support of Jefferson by losing his Senate seat in the spring of 1808. Under these circumstances, one might have expected a Republican defeat in the election of 1808, but due to their opponents' inability to consolidate their opposition and the peculiarities of the electoral system as it was then structured, James Madison was able to eke out a victory and continue the Virginia dynasty in office. However, the Republican majority in the electoral college was greatly reduced, as were Republican seats in the House. Moreover, many of the Northern Republicans were as hostile to the embargo as were the Federalists. The Congress that emerged was without policy and leaderless. Thus, politically, for Jefferson, the costs were "the fruits of eight years painful labor for popularity," while the Union was "brought to the edge of a precipice." And finally, of course, the policy failed to achieve its end of peaceable coercion. The War of 1812 still had to be fought to settle the maritime issues that had precipitated the crisis.

Adams makes two other notable points. The first is an early attempt to apply physical laws to political affairs. If, Adams reasoned, we think of an embargo as a force less violent than war, then to succeed, it must be applied for a longer time than a war in order to generate an equivalent amount of energy. Wars could last years, and it was only natural that embargoes would have to last longer if they were to succeed. But the price of such an attempt, on the evidence of the short experience of Jefferson's embargo, could only be the destruction of the Union. Although it is interesting, perhaps, this sort
of precise calculation seems so hard to make as to be almost delusive. Nonetheless, as a heuristic device, it is of some interest; certainly it is clear that if the embargo had not been repealed at the end of Jefferson’s term, the stability of the Union might have been undermined.

Finally, there is a more important observation that contributes to one of the long-standing debates about the nature of American history.

Under the shock of these discoveries Jefferson’s vast popularity vanished, and the labored fabric of his reputation fell in sudden and general ruin. America began slowly to struggle, under the consciousness of pain, toward a conviction that she must bear the common burdens of humanity, and fight with the weapons of other races in the same bloody arena; that she could not much longer delude herself with hopes of evading laws of Nature and instincts of life; and that her new statesmanship which made peace a passion could lead to no better result than had been reached by the barbarous systems which made war a duty.  

The debate in question is the idea of American exceptionalism, or, more specifically, the question of the end of American exceptionalism. In his vision of an egalitarian, hardworking, middle-class society freed of the limitations of aristocracy, Adams clearly subscribes to a form of the exceptionalist thesis, whose roots go back at least to his intellectual mentor Tocqueville. Here, however, he anticipates a theme often suggested in the twentieth century, namely, that America could not maintain an isolationist stance and hold itself aloof from world affairs, and further, to the extent that this was so, the United States must necessarily lose its innocence and play by the same rules as other powers. For Diggins, Adams’s observations look ahead to the teachings of Max Weber and Reinhold Niebuhr, who criticized pacifists “who would cling to their ethical integrity regardless of consequences.” This is true, I think, though the matter is even more complicated than Diggins makes it. Jefferson was willing to compromise his principles over Louisiana with hardly a backward glance, but in foreign affairs, he held to the essence of his policy of peaceable coercion long after it was realistic to do so. His policy was the policy of a pacifist. Diggins is close to the mark. Thinking of Louisiana, he writes, “Jefferson succeeded in politics by ceasing to practice philosophy.” Thus, in this point of view, Jefferson might have done better had he abandoned his principled philosophy in foreign relations as he did in making the Louisiana Purchase. But Adams sharply attacks him for abandoning principle in his great Louisiana success and then, perhaps more importantly, for
failing to justify this departure. Conversely, Jefferson’s great failure was in foreign relations, and there Adams attacks him precisely for following principle, especially since the very implementation of the embargo policy forced him to resort to an intrusive government that also, paradoxically, was in violation of Jeffersonian principles. Thus, Jefferson learned the lesson of what international relations theorists call “realism” in his conduct of domestic affairs, but in foreign affairs, the lesson was still to be understood. The embargo did not solve his policy problem. As James Madison was to learn, mere trade sanctions could not avert war in the effort to protect American shipping, though in his own rather inept way, Madison solved his problem.

Out-Federalizing the Federalists?

The most general, and most famous, interpretation offered by Adams in the History is his thesis that Jefferson out-federalized the Federalists, a position implicit in the previous discussion of the Louisiana Purchase. “If,” Adams writes, “Jefferson’s favorite phrase was true,—that the Federalist differed from the Republican only in the shade more or less of power to be given to the executive,—it was hard to see how any President could be more Federalist than Jefferson himself.” Writing of the conduct of foreign affairs, he adds, “of all Presidents, none used these arbitrary powers with more freedom and secrecy than Jefferson.” This is very much a Federalist, even Hamiltonian, approach to executive power, though arguably it is not inconsistent with Jefferson’s constitutional theory. David Mayer contends that although Jefferson anguished over the problem, in political economy and foreign relations he was a nationalist. In these areas he resorted to a Hamiltonian use of the necessary and proper clause. Here he considered himself to have wide discretionary powers as president. Thus, Mayer goes so far as to say that although Jefferson was deeply concerned with the apparent constitutional problem inherent in the purchase, his actions involved a mere “technical problem.” Perhaps this is true, but the stress on Jefferson’s anguish undercuts this point to a considerable extent. In any case, whatever his constitutional scruples, Jefferson’s actions revealed a capacity for the exercise of sweeping presidential power, a precedent that, though not consistently followed until the twentieth century, pointed the way ahead. Adams’s remark that it was now clear that the United States could in fact govern itself indicates a willingness to accept this new dispensation, though, like Jefferson, he would have preferred it to be ratified by a constitutional amendment. Adams’s constitutional purism could be as flexible as Jefferson’s.
When it comes to executive authority, then, Adams’s claim that Jefferson’s constitutional practice was much like that recommended by his Federalist enemies seems quite sound. However, if one considers the whole range of public policy, the idea of Jefferson in thrall to Federalist policies holds up less well. Though it should be stressed that Adams’s claims relate to the federal system and the use of executive power, a broader consideration of Jefferson’s administration reveals a greater consistency between theory and practice. As Joyce Appleby points out, “In office, the Jeffersonians carried out their mandate with remarkable fidelity. Direct taxes were repealed, the national debt was quickly retired, revenues were applied to internal improvements, and the size of the federal government was scaled down despite the enlargement of national territory. International free trade was pursued with a vengeance and land sales jumped astronomically.” This, she says, “should lay the ghost” of Adams’s interpretation. There is something to be said for this point of view, but not quite enough to dispose of Adams. Appleby is convincing that Jefferson did indeed pursue his own theoretical notions and implemented them in policy, but it remains true that he conceived of executive power much more expansively than his political thought might suggest. And the argument that he pursued free trade with a “vengeance” must be qualified by pointing to the embargo. Thus, in its broad outlines, a qualified version of Adams’s interpretation holds up fairly well.

What Adams and Appleby share is a belief that Jefferson was right to think of his administration as a revolutionary force. As Appleby puts it, “The revolution came from the defeat of aristocratic values in American politics.” What they both see is the emergence of a commercial, inventive, democratic society, a society that Adams saw as a major advance over anything Europe had to offer, though not, of course, free of problems.

But Adams appears to exhibit some real theoretical tensions in his thinking about Jefferson. It is not an easy argument to criticize Jefferson for abandoning principle in one arena and clinging to it in another. Perhaps because of his own self-limiting positivism, however inconsistently held, and perhaps because of his own philosophical uncertainty, Adams might appear to leave an unresolved tension at the heart of his critique of Jefferson. But perhaps the tension is more apparent than real. No doubt part of the difficulty is that Adams, since he writes as a historian rather than a philosopher, is unwilling to provide an explicit normative critique of Jefferson’s policy. Moreover, his own position is complex, though the outline is clear. Implicitly, in Adams’s analysis, one must ask two questions: Were Jefferson’s principles viable? and Did he meet his obligation to provide explanations of his policies that would
establish their democratic legitimacy? In the case of Louisiana, Jefferson's radical decentralist principles were untenable, and Jefferson did well to abandon them, but his justification for doing so was inadequate and thus did not meet the test required of a democratic leader who needed to provide civic education. Nor did he ever admit that his original theories were inadequate. As for the embargo, he held to his untenable principles, and the result was political and economic disaster. In both cases he was dishonest with the public and probably with himself as well. He refused to admit that his doctrines were wrong or, in the case of the embargo, to accept, until it was too late, that his policies too were disastrous. Adams's position on the relation of principle to practice is complex, though not more so than required by the situation he describes. No Adams could doubt that principles were important, but if the principles were unsound, then policies pursuant to them were likely to encounter difficulties. And, just as important, the abandonment of principles in the pursuit of policy had to be justified by the enunciation of new principles in order to meet the basic requirements of democratic political legitimacy. And, of course, the matter is further complicated by the extent to which Adams seems to have admired Jefferson's temperament and the fact that, while he thought some of Jefferson's ideas to be mistaken, he still preferred the second president's egalitarian democratic principles to those of the Federalist opposition. (Perhaps this is why he admired Albert Gallatin so much. Here was a democrat without Jefferson's quirky Virginian views.) As is often the case in the vast body of Adams's work, there is a deep ambivalence in his thought. His was a mind too complex to advance simple interpretive solutions. This is why he remains elusive to this day.