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Henry Adams: The Historian as Political Theorist.

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Henry Adams was clearly fascinated by Thomas Jefferson, however frustrating the results of his observations. Though equally frustrated with James Madison, Adams seems to have had very little interest in Madison as a person and held his presidential career in low esteem. Madison simply lacked the charm that helped make Jefferson so interesting to Adams. Adams, with his usual gift for portraiture, offers a somewhat condescending description. “Madison had a sense of humor, felt in his conversation, and detected in the demure cast of his flexible lips, but leaving no trace in his published writings. Small in stature, in deportment modest to the point of sensitive reserve, in address simple and pleasing, in feature rather thoughtful and benevolent than strong, he was such a man as Jefferson, who so much disliked contentious and self-asserting manners, loved to keep by his side.” Later he offers a somewhat more complex picture. Madison is described as a man “incapable of surprising the world by reckless ambition or lawless acts.” Yet he “paid surprisingly little regard to rules of consistency or caution.” Citing Madison’s Virginia Resolutions, his role in the Louisiana Purchase, his embargo policy, and numerous other foreign policy actions, Adams says, “he ignored caution in pursuit of an object which seemed to him proper in itself; nor could he understand why this quiet and patriotic conduct should arouse tempests of passion in his opponents, whose violence, by contrast, increased the apparent placidity of his own persistence.”

But in spite of this reckless streak, Jefferson and Madison made a near ideal pair. As Joseph Ellis writes, “Jefferson orchestrated the strategy and Madison implemented the tactics. Jefferson could afford to emphasize the broadest contours of a political problem because Madison was silently handling the messier specifics. (If God was in the details, Madison was usually there to greet Him upon arrival.)” And yet, as even Ernest Samuels concludes, doubtless reflecting Adams, “the very materials of Madison’s first administration defied enlivening. . . . After the greater Jefferson left the stage, . . . the colorless Madison was pure anticlimax.”

For Adams, Madison represented a mediocre continuation of Jeffersonian-
ism. His necessary historical role was to “retrieve the failures of Jefferson,” but the utter “conventionality” of his thought betrayed itself in his First Inaugural Address. Dismayingly, “Madison seemed to show his contentment with the policy hitherto pursued, rather than his wish to change it,” though in fairness to Madison, given the political circumstances and his close partnership with Jefferson, it was all but necessary to proceed as he did. And for the great tasks before him, “Madison’s cabinet,” in Adams’s evaluation, “was the least satisfactory that any President had known,” with the exception of Albert Gallatin. So weak were they that they hardly had strength enough to support two sides of an argument. To have such an administration at such a time was potentially dangerous. Faction was rife. Jefferson had strained his authority to the breaking point, and the result was social as well as political disorder. And yet, in spite of Adams’s perception of Madison’s incompetence, and “dark as the prospect was within and without,” the president was able to calm the situation temporarily, not least because in New England the economic stimulus to manufacturing and shipping interests provided by the embargo generated a need for order felt by the most militant Federalists. And in spite of his animadversions against the embargo, Adams was forced to admit that, “in truth, the manufactories of New England were created by the embargo, which obliged the whole nation to consume their products or go without.” From a Jeffersonian point of view, the results were ironic and painful, while it must be said that the New Englanders were more than a little hypocritical:

The Yankee, however ill-tempered he might be, was shrewd enough to see where his profit lay. The Federalist leaders and newspapers grumbled without intermission that their life-blood was drained to support a Negro-slave aristocracy . . . , but they took the profits thrust upon them; and what they could not clutch was taken by New York and Pennsylvania, while Virginia slowly sank into ruin. Virginia paid the price to gratify her passion for political power, and at the time, she paid it knowingly and willingly . . . . American manufactures owed more to Jefferson and Virginians, who disliked them, than to northern statesmen, who merely encouraged them after they were established.

One begins to see here the strong sense that history rarely moves according to the plans of historical actors, a theme that must be explored more fully, since it assumes a large place in Adams’s work and becomes a major component of his general philosophy of history.

Even though a temporary improvement in relations with England raised Madison to great heights of equally temporary popularity that placed him on
a par with Jefferson at his greatest height, the basic trajectory of his administration turned downward. Adams sums up his critique in a series of three devastating chapters whose titles sum up the indictment: "Executive Weakness," "Legislative Impotence," and "Incapacity of Government." According to Adams, Madison derived all the power he possessed from British mismanagement of foreign policy. But what power he had did not lead to any consistent policy. Francis Jackson, retiring as the English ambassador in March 1810, wrote, "At Washington they are in a state of the most animated confusion, the Cabinet divided, and the Democratic party going various ways . . . Their foreign policies embarrass them even more than their home ones. One moment they want another embargo, the next, to take off the restrictions; then, to arm their merchantmen; and next to declare war. In short, they do not know what to be at." At last, reflecting Madison's distrust of unrestricted commerce that was so deeply ingrained in Jeffersonian republican principles, a new Non-Intercourse Act was passed in March 1809, with the same dismaying consequences as the earlier measures.

Ingenuity [Adams claims], could hardly have invented a system less advantageous for the government and people who maintained it. The government lost its revenue, the shipping lost much of its freight, the people paid double prices on imports and received half-prices for their products; industry was checked, speculation and fraud were stimulated, while certain portions of the country were grievously wronged. Especially in the Southern States all articles produced for exchange were depressed to the lowest possible value, while all articles imported for consumption were raised to extravagant rates.

Thus, once again, the pursuit of a misguided principle created havoc, which affected most dramatically the region represented by the perpetrators of the policy. In fact, a fundamental problem of the Jeffersonians seems to be that principle and policy were rarely in alignment, a condition that a stern moralist such as Adams inevitably found disturbing. The experiment of "peaceable coercion" may have been worth making during the Jefferson administration, but clearly the idea had been invalidated by the time Madison reached the White House and should have been abandoned due to the noxious consequences that flowed from it. Bad principle makes for bad policy, and there is no credit to be had from adhering to it. In contrast, to abandon principle, even in pursuit of a policy whose long-run consequences were beneficent, as in the case of Louisiana, was also deplorable because of the damage done
to constitutional integrity. The Jeffersonians could hardly win when caught in this intellectual vise.

But worse was to come. The failure to make American shipping safe on the high seas led to the War of 1812, which not only destroyed Madison’s popularity but also strained the Union close to the breaking point.

And yet, in Adams’s view, the war need not have been fought. Madison’s speech asking Congress for a declaration of war against Britain revealed the deficiencies of his thinking. He charged the British with continuing the policy of impressment of American citizens on the high seas and also with violating the peace of the coasts while harassing commerce. Both charges were true and, according to Adams, “warranted war.” To these complaints were added two others, also involving depredations against American shipping in the form of blockades, particularly those deriving from the British orders in council. But true and demonstrable though the charges were, Adams was still not satisfied by Madison’s justification for war. It was, in his view, a war fought at the wrong time and against an only partially identified enemy. In particular, in his message, Madison ignored what Adams took to be the offenses of the French that were as great as or greater than those of the British.

The various wrongs cited had long been endured because it seemed expedient to do so as an alternative to war. In fact, Jefferson believed that war, however just, was always inexpedient. Moreover, the British, though not the French, showed signs of yielding on the issues. In Adams’s view, “In June, 1812, the reasons for declaring war on Great Britain were weaker than they had been in June 1808 or in January 1809.” In 1807, England would have welcomed war, but in 1812, it wanted peace and was willing to surrender a good deal to get it. On the other side, in 1808, the United States was ready for war; in 1812, the people were divided, the government weak, and the treasury empty.

The war was unpopular even from the start, when one often expects a conflict to win broad public endorsement. Madison’s support in both the House and the Senate was seriously eroded. None of this was made better by what Adams took to be Madison’s incompetence, which sapped half the energy of the American people and enabled the New England Federalists to persuade themselves that “Jefferson and Madison were sold to France.”

At times, the military disasters were truly humiliating, as when Madison was ignominiously forced to flee the burning capital city. But Adams’s greatest rage seems to have been aroused by the fall of Fort Detroit. The president ordered a court-martial of William Hull, the garrison commander. He was
charged with treason, cowardice, neglect of duty, and "unofficer-like" conduct. The president, who had a deep interest in Hull’s conviction, so as to shift the blame from himself, then blundered by making General Dearborn, whose own war record was also at stake, the president of the court-martial, thus installing in power another with a vested interest in seeing a conviction. This evident "impropriety" seemed lost on Madison; Hull was sentenced to be shot, with Madison approving but then remitting the sentence. Adams was outraged: "That someone should be punished for the loss of Detroit was evident, and few persons were likely to complain because Hull was the selected victim"; but "many thought," Adams tells us, "that if Hull deserved to be shot, other men, much higher than he in office and responsibility, merited punishment; and the character of the court-martial added no credit to the government, which in effect it acquitted of blame." Precisely what Adams intended by this sally is not altogether clear. Peter Shaw, always ready to attribute to Adams the harshest possible judgments on Jefferson and Madison, contends that this suggests that the president, having failed to prepare the nation for war, "should have been tried and executed for criminal incompetence." This may be so, since Adams often argues by indirection. However, there is room for interpretation, because there are other superiors short of the president who might have been tried, and Adams is not explicit as to the target of his wrath. Nor is execution explicitly mentioned, perhaps due to the fact that Hull’s sentence was never carried out. Moreover, criminal incompetence is not punishable by death. However, Madison was the commander in chief and hence the bearer of the ultimate responsibility. It is certainly true that Adams’s analysis drips with contempt for Madison not only on grounds of incompetence but also for his poor judgment in choosing a deeply interested party to preside over the fate of Hull. Certainly the episode was not one of the luminous moments in the history of the Madison presidency.

But military disasters were not the only troubles in the war. Political disaffection was widespread, not least in Adams’s native New England. Here the issue of separatism, which so troubled him when it appeared in the South, seemed to be an even more immediate political threat to the Union the Adams family had so long defended. As the war neared its end, a large part of the "most intelligent citizens" feared the worst in the impending battle of New Orleans and also worried that the peace negotiations in Ghent would fall apart. The enemies of the government in New England were certain that these events would lead to the collapse of the national government. Already the Hartford Convention, made up of New England dissidents, was meeting to assess the situation. Federalist ultras were ready to make major concessions
to the British in order to secure peace and were prepared to establish a new constitution encompassing “either the whole or a portion of the actual Union.” Adams was by no means friendly to the New England Federalists and asserts that it was quite possible that “much was said that verged on treasonable conspiracy,” but in the end, when Harrison Gray Otis caused the official journal of the convention to be published, it was evident that the delegates had behaved with some circumspection, which “proved that nothing was done or formally proposed which contradicted the grave and the strained attitude maintained in [the leader’s] public expression.” So too did George Lodge, who was chosen to preside. It appears on Adams’s evidence that the delegates were in fact more conservative than their constituents. Secession was in the air, but the convention report states that “a severance of the Union by one or more States against the will of the rest, and especially in time of war, can be justified only by absolute necessity.” But having made this plea for moderation, the report then closely followed the Virginia Resolution in claiming “the right and duty of a State to ‘interpose its authority’ for the protection of its citizens from infractions of the Constitution by the general government.” In the eyes of an Adams writing in the post-Civil War period, this position could hardly qualify as moderate, whatever the protestations of the authors and however more restrained than that of the public and the press in New England. In effect, such provisions as the states being given a “reasonable” portion of taxes collected within the state and the rejection of conscription so that the states could assume their own defense clearly moved toward the establishment of a New England Confederation. Because of the urgency of the situation, these provisions were to be accepted immediately. Besides these matters of pressing concern, seven constitutional amendments, which Adams oddly does not specify in detail, were proposed.

The proposed amendments were clearly aimed at the South and at Virginia in particular. From today’s perspective, the first, which called for abolition of the three-fifths clause of the Constitution, seems totally unexceptionable, though in its time it was politically explosive. The second required a two-thirds vote to admit new states; the third and fourth placed restrictions on embargoes and the interdiction of commerce; the fifth required the concurrence of two-thirds of both houses of Congress to declare war or “authorize acts of hostility,” except in self-defense; the sixth precluded naturalized citizens from serving in the House or Senate, or even from holding civil office; and the last imposed a one-term limit on the president and proclaimed that the president could not be elected from the same state two times in succession, an obvious slap at the Virginia Dynasty.
These resolutions may have been “moderate” in the overheated atmosphere of the time, but they were certainly well calculated to upset supporters of the Republican administration. In this the Republicans were perhaps not entirely wrong, even though on the interposition matter they were, in effect, being given a dose of their own medicine. At least one newspaper, the Boston Centinal, claimed that the old Constitution was no more. Addressing the convention, it editorialized, “At your hands, therefore, we demand deliverance. New England is Unanimous. And we announce our irrevocable decree that the tyrannical oppression of those who at present usurp the powers of the Constitution is beyond endurance. And we shall resist it.” With heavy irony, Gouverneur Morris wrote to Senator Pickering, “The traitors and madmen assembled at Hartford will, I believe, if not too tame and timid, be hailed hereafter as the patriots and sages of their day and generation.”

In later times, Adams observes, the Hartford Convention was often defended on the ground that popular opinion was more extreme than the convention’s. Adams gives considerable credence to this view: “The tone of the press and the elections bore out the belief that a popular majority would have supported an abrupt and violent course.” Threats of civil war were frequent, and there was talk of coercing Madison into retirement. It was certainly the belief of the Republican Party that the convention could only lead to a New England Confederation.

But the Republicans were not alone in this estimate. George Ticknor, a twenty-three-year-old Federalist, loved to tell of his meeting with the elderly John Adams, who declaimed to him in a loud and excited voice: “Thank God! Thank God! George Cabot’s close-buttoned ambition has broke out at last: he wants to be President of New England, sir.” Here Henry Adams’s true feelings about the secessionist tendencies in his native region appear, and once again his view is validated by one of his distinguished ancestors. Whether he wanted it or not, Cabot was in danger of becoming what John Adams had predicted, having been forced into a position from which there was no escape. It was hard for either people or leaders to retreat. Once taxes were sequestered, “the establishment of a New England confederation could hardly be matter of choice.” The danger was real. The anticipated fall of New Orleans would have been the signal to demand Madison’s resignation. Henry Adams did not believe that it would come to this. However, the fall of both Washington and New Orleans would have destroyed the president’s authority. To resign was impossible, but “the alternative was a collapse of government,” and in this crisis, “the least probable solution was that England would consent to any tolerable peace.” Perilous times indeed! An incom-
petent government generated secessionist pressures that were anathema to a devoted nationalist, and there had been serious national humiliations.\

And yet the worst did not happen. Andrew Jackson won a famous victory at New Orleans, which had the effect of choking off the Hartford initiatives. The peace talks at Ghent did not founder, though they were resolved only when Madison gave up the demand for an end to impressment, which had been the principle casus belli. Essentially the war ended with a return to the status quo ante, though the number of incidents of British impressment declined sharply. In the conduct of the war, however inept it had been, even Adams found some cause for celebration, most notably the triumphs of American gunnery, particularly at sea, the remarkable quality of American warships, and the outstanding skills of the American rifleman. There had been signs of this sort of technological achievement as early as August 17, 1807, when Robert Fulton took the steamship Clermont on its first voyage up the Hudson River. This was a day that separated “the colonial from the independent stage of growth.” Thus, “for the first time America could consider herself mistress of her vast resources.”\

This leads Adams to an important reflection:

The unfailing mark of a primitive society was to regard war as the most natural pursuit of man; and history with reason began as a record of war, because, in fact, all other human occupations were secondary to this. The chief sign that Americans had other qualities than the races from which they sprang, was shown by their dislike for war as a profession, and their obstinate attempts to invent other methods for obtaining their ends. . . . Desperate physical courage was the common quality on which all great races had founded their greatness; and the people of the United States, in discarding military qualities, without devoting themselves to science, were trying an experiment which could succeed only in a world of their own.\

This triumphant remark reflects Adams’s delight in the American success in overcoming the backward state of technology lamented in the discussion of the United States in 1800. It also suggests that the picture of Adams as a simple technophobe so commonly based on a reading of his late writings is overdrawn and in need of revision. It points toward the United States becoming a world power through technological innovation and suggests one of the attributes of American exceptionalism, in that Adams clearly alludes here to the emergence of a distinctive American identity.

The war proved American superiority in a number of technically based
areas. In spite of Adams's delight in the success of Robert Fulton, which was the most striking success in the application of science, "it was neither the most original nor the most ingenious of American efforts, nor did it offer the best example of popular characteristics." Other inventions such as the torpedo, the screw propeller, and perhaps above all the fast sailing schooner with a pivot gun deserved that honor. In any case, the Americans developed surprising skill in naval affairs. Even according to the British newspapers, American cruisers "threatened to overthrow England's supremacy on the ocean." And battle after battle showed that American gunnery at sea was superior to England's. The American rifle fired by American soldiers was felt to be unequaled, partly because every American learned to shoot from childhood. And finally, the war gave tremendous impetus to the development of scientific engineering. All this demanded great ingenuity, but what Adams thought it said about the level of either intelligence or morality is a subject to which we must return.

In spite of these important successes, there is no doubt that much of the war seemed a disaster to Adams. Nor was the incompetence limited to the Madison administration. Adams wryly remarks that "readers who have followed the history here closed, have been surprised at the frequency with which the word imbecility has risen in their minds in reading the proceedings of the House." He continued:

So strong was the same impression at the time, that in the year 1814, at the close of the war, every earnest patriot in the Union, and many men who were neither earnest nor patriotic, were actively reproaching the House for its final failure, at an apparent crisis of the national existence, to call out or organize any considerable part of the national energies. The people in truth, however jealous of power, would have liked in imagination, though they would not bear in practice, to be represented by something nobler, wiser, and purer than their own average honor, wisdom, and purity. They could not make an ideal of weakness, ignorance, or vice, even their own; and as they required in their religion the idea of an infinitely wise and powerful deity, they revolted in their politics from whatever struck them as sordid or selfish.

What we see here is a complex sense of the difficulties of representative democracy. The instincts of the people are good, perhaps for the best, though they distrust the idea of strong government. But their leaders betray them, a problem first glimpsed in the Jefferson administration, when the president eroded
his authority through his methods of imposing the embargo and thereby failed in his responsibility to elevate the people through his leadership.

In the end, in spite of many serious complaints, Adams offers a very nuanced verdict on the outcome of the war and of the Jeffersonian years in general, if not on the quality of the leaders. Certainly there were major economic benefits. The doubts that had accompanied the nation's birth were put to rest. Population and wealth were steadily increasing. Every immediate foreign or domestic peril had disappeared, so that the society could devote itself to whatever it pleased. The way was open for rapid economic progress. "The continent lay before [the people] like an uncovered ore-bed." 39

Given his animadversions against both president and Congress, it makes considerable sense to say that Adams's real hero is the collective people. William Jordy is characteristically terse in his account: "All but leaderless," as Adams saw it, "the people redeemed the blunders of their statesmen and stumbled through the War of 1812." 40 Peter Shaw puts the thesis well: "Madison's war was saved only by the real hero of the History, the American people, whose nascent pride and heroism, though Madison was temperamentally incapable of recognizing them, salvaged his fortunes and those of the incompetent generals he had appointed." Thus the real strength of the American nation was proved. 41 This is close to Adams's view, which is more vivid and more nuanced.

Only by slow degrees the country learned to appreciate the extraordinary feat which had been performed, not so much by the people as by a relatively small number of individuals. Had a village rustic, with one hand tied behind his back, challenged the champion of the prize-ring, and in three or four rounds obliged him to withdraw the stakes, the result would have been little more surprising than the result of the American campaign of 1814. 42

But even with Adams's qualification, this is a great tribute to the people. The victory belonged not to aristocrats, for there were none, and certainly not to the political leadership, and still less to the generals. If the victory was not due to the people en masse, it certainly could be attributed to enough of them drawn from the ranks of ordinary citizens to warrant a faith in the viability of democracy.

Perhaps the clue to the final Adams family judgment on the war comes from great-grandfather John. "Mr. Madison's administration must be accorded by the historians, notwithstanding all the errors, blunders, confusions,
distractions, disasters, and factions with which it has been tarnished, as the most glorious period of the history of the United States,” a position that seems suggestive, though certainly hyperbolic. Henry’s own view is more complex but, in the end, perhaps not entirely different. Referring to the attempt to induce Britain to renounce the right to impressment, Adams writes:

The experiment was worth trying, and after the timidity of the American government in past years was well suited to create national character, if it did not destroy the nation; but it was not the less hazardous in the face of sectional passions such as existed in New England, or in the hands of a party which held power by virtue of Jefferson’s principles. That the British government should expressly renounce its claim to impressment was already an idea hardly worth entertaining; but if the war could not produce that result, it might at least develop a government strong enough to attain the same result at some future time. If a strong government was desired, any foreign war, without regard to its object, might be good policy, if not good morals; and in that sense President Madison’s war was the boldest and most successful of all experiments in American statesmanship, though it was also among the most reckless; but only with difficulty could history offer a better example of its processes than when it showed Madison, Gallatin, Macon, Monroe, and Jefferson joining to create a mercenary army and a great national debt for no other attainable object than that which had guided Alexander Hamilton and the Federalists toward the establishment of a strong national government fifteen years before.

Interpreting this comment is somewhat tricky. Shaw contends, “The passage could easily be read as ironical about history and sympathetic toward Madison, where actually it was ironical toward Madison and pleased with the ironies of history.” Given Adams’s cast of mind, this distinction may be smaller than Shaw believes, but certainly he is right that there are ironies. Madison was not a partisan of strong government, so that for someone like Adams who was, the experiment was, ironically, a success, even if inadvertent. But it seems less clear than it does to Shaw that Madison’s hope that the British would abandon the principle of impressment was foolish. After all, principle or not, the practice was largely abandoned. And given the state of preparedness of the United States, the war surely could be called reckless, though it is less certain that Adams found it immoral, particularly given his sense of the possible benefits of war. As always, Shaw reads Adams in a way that makes him maximally critical of Madison, and Jefferson too, for that matter. But that raises complex issues about the extent to which any historical
actors have real influence over the course of history. These issues are part of Adams's emerging philosophy of history, and to them it will be necessary to return more than once.

Before turning to these problems however, Adams's political conclusions about the War of 1812 should be considered. These too have a bearing on one of his lifelong philosophical concerns: the relations between unity and diversity. About the end of the war, Adams writes:

Until 1815 nothing in the future of the American Union was regarded as settled. As late as January, 1815, division into several nationalities was still thought to be possible. Such a destiny, repeating the usual experience of history, was not necessarily more unfortunate than the career of a single nationality wholly American; for if the effects of a divided nationality were certain to be unhappy, those of a single society with equal certainty defied experience or sound speculation. One uniform and harmonious system appealed to the imagination as a triumph of human progress, offered prospects of peace and ease, contentment and philanthropy, such as the world had not seen; but it invited dangers, formidable because unusual or altogether unknown. The corruption of such a system might prove to be proportionate with its dimensions, and uniformity might lead to evils as serious as were commonly ascribed to diversity.47

Adams's sense of the uniqueness and the difficulties of the American system is clear. However new it might be, Americans no longer doubted that the path they were to take would not follow European models; Adams says, "the American in his political character, was a new variety of man."48 Late in life, Adams as a philosopher desperately pursued unity. Here he is more ambivalent. He sees the advantages of unity and hopes for the best, but looking back after the Civil War, he can see the troubles that will arise. The question is, as John Patrick Diggins says, "Are we to emphasize the pluribus or the unum, the many or the one?"49 This dilemma is a permanent factor in American history, perhaps now more than ever.

The United States in 1817

The entire structure of Adams's magnum opus points to the last four chapters on the Madison years, which close the frame of the whole work begun with the six chapters on the United States in 1800. Here Adams assesses the results of the tumultuous events of the Jefferson and Madison administrations. He
begins with a discussion of the economy. The analysis of the beneficial development of technology has already been described. Beyond this, population growth was so rapid as to produce a doubling in twenty-three years. In spite of this, the war led to a check on the growth of cities. Economic and population growth were distributed somewhat unequally, with the Middle Atlantic states growing faster than New England or the South, but in general, there was cause for optimism. To repeat, the continent lay open to the people. "With almost the certainty of a mathematical formula, knowing the rate of increase of population and of wealth, they could read in advance their economical history for at least a hundred years."

One could not be so optimistic about the world of literature and art. The situation was rather like the prevailing political mood, in that just as society showed an interest in discussing political or religious dogma but had no interest in being subjected to it, it also "touched here and there, with a light hand, the wide circuit of what was called belles lettres, without showing severity in either taste or temper." Except for the work of Washington Irving, little remains of what Adams described, so it is enough to note his closing comment, which is entirely consistent with the general theme of his work as a whole. The Americans, he says, were not artistic and had little sense of beauty, "but their intelligence in its higher as in its lower forms was both quick and refined." Literature and art showed qualities similar to those that produced the great schooners. "If the artistic instinct weakened, the quickness of intelligence increased." Presumably, this would not lead to a great culture, but as a frame of mind for a rapidly growing commercial republic, it had clear advantages.

In spite of this, it is perhaps not surprising that Adams found the movement of political and religious thought more interesting than either economics or literature, though it must be said that he was not very impressed by the quality of that thought. One should bear in mind the dramatic change brought about by the end of the war, in particular the explosion of commerce and navigation following the cessation of hostilities. "The ease and rapidity of this revolution not only caused the war to be quickly forgotten, but also silenced political passions. For the first time in their history as a nation, the people of the United States ceased to disturb themselves about politics or patronage. Every political principle was still open to dispute, and was disputed, but prosperity put an end to faction."

Adams is not terribly impressed by religious thought, which was characterized primarily by the decline of rigorous dogma, seen largely in the rise of Unitarianism and the relative decline of Calvinism. By offering a qualified
rejection of the Trinity and offering what they thought to be a more plausible view of Christ’s divinity, the theologians “subverted an essential doctrine of the Church, and opened the way to heresy.” Across the country, the debate seemed more emotional than intellectual, with the partial exception of Boston. There, the Unitarian claim advanced by William Ellery Channing—that the doctrine of the Trinity would suffice if only it were intelligible—led Adams to say, “Calvinists could not be blamed for thinking that their venerable creed, the painful outcome of the closest and most strenuous reasoning known in the Christian world,” was entitled to more respect than to be called, as Channing put it, “little else than a mystical form of the Unitarian doctrine.” On the one hand, Adams is somewhat troubled by this cavalier attitude toward Calvinist theology, but he is forced to concede that the early stage of Unitarianism was of interest because “it marked a general tendency of national thought.” On the other hand, he is not unimpressed by the new theology. “No such display of fresh and winning genius had yet been seen in America as was offered by the genial outburst of intellectual activity in the early days of the Unitarian schism.” It might also be observed that even Adams, when writing about medieval theology, most notably including the Trinity, was more than a little heretical himself. Finally, he notes approvingly that the Unitarians in particular and the other popular religions in general were marked by “high social and intellectual character” and also by a “humanitarian tendency.”

In this complex situation, the Congregationalists made a political mistake. “Driven to bay by deistic and utilitarian principles of Jefferson’s democracy, they fell into the worldly error of defying the national instinct, pressing their resistance to the war until it amounted to treasonable conspiracy. The sudden peace swept away much that was respectable in the old society of America, but perhaps its noblest victim was the unity of the New England Church.”

False though this ecclesiastical self-confidence might have been, the political theorists were notably less confident. The first sixteen years of the new century were “singularly barren of new political ideas.” After the great flowering of ideas in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, Americans seemed interested only in the practical workings of their institutions rather than in developing the principles of their government. “The same tendency which in religion led to a reaction against dogma, was shown in politics by a general acquiescence in practices which left unsettled the disputed principles of government. No one could say with confidence what theory of the Constitution had prevailed. Neither party was satisfied, although both acquiesced.”

In fact, constitutional law stood almost still for a time; John Marshall’s great
decisions such as *McCulloch v. Maryland*, the Dartmouth College case, and *Cohens v. Virginia* still lay ahead, outside the time frame of Adams's work. Still, *Fletcher v. Peck* and *Martin v. Hunter's Lessee*, the latter by Justice Story, solidified the power of the Supreme Court over the states. In the *Martin* case, the Court importantly held that the Constitution could in fact “operate on States in their corporate capacity.”

In the face of such decisions, Jefferson still clung to his states' rights principles, returning to his old theme that “the national and state governments were ‘as independent, in fact, as different,’ and that the function of one was foreign, while that of the other was domestic.” For Madison’s part, he still believed that Congress could not build internal improvements such as roads; when Congress did so, Madison responded with a veto. Adams concludes, “In politics as in theology, the practical system which resulted from sixteen years of experience seemed to rest on the agreement not to press principles to a conclusion.”

No really new political ideas were put forward. Old and incompatible ideas continued to exist together like theological dogmas, but there was a difference between the movement of political and religious thought. “The Church showed no tendency to unite in any creed or dogma,—indeed, religious society rather tended toward more divisions; but in politics public opinion slowly moved in a fixed direction.” Jefferson might protest and Madison might veto internal improvements, but the movement was real. “No one doubted that a change had occurred since 1798. The favorite States-rights dogma of that time had suffered irreparable injury. For sixteen years the national government in all its branches had acted, without listening to remonstrance, on the rule that it was the rightful interpreter of its own powers. In this assumption, the Executive, the Legislature, and the Judiciary had agreed.” This meant in fact, if not in theory, that the Jeffersonians had accepted the Federalist theory of the Constitution, even down to rechartering the Bank of the United States, a point that is probably the most famous of the generalizations of the *History.* The only major theoretical work of the time was produced by John Taylor of Caroline, a voice crying in the wilderness, whose theory was historically obsolete as soon as it appeared. Even Taylor saw this, as he recognized that the Virginia school, while admiring the theory, did not follow its tenets. In all except theory, the Jeffersonian tradition appeared exhausted, and even the theory was beside the point.

Be that as it may, it is clear that for Adams, the changes in national character that took place during the Jefferson and Madison years were more important than those that occurred in politics. As late as January 1815, divi-
sion into several nationalities still seemed possible. The effects of division would certainly have been unpleasant, but no one at that time could imagine a single society on a continental scale, however much it might appeal as a sign of progress. And, Adams comments somewhat ominously, not to say prophetically, “The corruption of such a system might prove to be proportionate with its dimensions, and uniformity might lead to evils as serious as were commonly ascribed to diversity.”

War had proved to be a severe test, but in spite of the strange course of the struggle with England, the United States emerged more unified than before. Perhaps more importantly, the differences from other societies were better defined.

Already in 1817 the difference between Europe and America was decided. In politics the distinction was more evident than in social, religious, literary or scientific directions; and the result was singular. For a time the aggressions of England and France forced the United States into a path that seemed to lead toward European methods of government; but the popular resistance, or inertia, was so great that the most popular party leaders failed to overcome it; and no sooner did foreign dangers disappear than the system began to revert to American practices; the national government tried to lay aside its assumed powers.

The result was peculiar. Public opinion and practicality drove the nation toward a European standard of sovereignty, but the form that sovereignty assumed “diverged from any foreign type.” To repeat, “The American,” says Adams, “in his political character, was a new variety of man.”

The dynamic of society was changed and also decided. The gap between Europe and America grew, while interest in Europe lessened. France no longer affected American opinion, and the British generated less alarm. The influence of New England was reduced, and the social cachet of close ties to England eroded. Ocean commerce became more balanced, and the South and West produced “a character more aggressively American than had been known before.” Again Adams turns prophetic, claiming, “That Europe, within certain limits, might tend toward American ideas was possible, but that America should under any circumstances follow the experiences of European development might thenceforward be reckoned as improbable. The American character was formed, if not fixed.”

This clearly is a statement of American exceptionalism, however much Adams seems to move toward the view that, at least in the realm of foreign policy, America would have to adopt a form of European realism according
to which it would have to act as did other great powers. In spite of this, it is
the difference from European society that Adams stresses. Just as Tocqueville
claimed that a new science of politics would be required for the new nation,
Adams sees the need for a new form of “scientific” history, a history able to
cope with the economic development of a great democracy. The history of
Europe had been a history of fierce struggle that made permanence scarce
and exalted the heroic individual. In Europe, as Adams sees it, great men
were more interesting than their societies, a fact that may account for the
brilliance of his portrait of Napoleon. But, overlooking the Civil War that
occurred between the period Adams studied and the time he wrote about it,
American history looked able to avoid such turbulence. Of course, since
Adams knew full well the massive upheaval that was to come, one must pre­
sume that he refers to the feelings of the American people in 1817. The
Americans were not entirely happy with this placid condition. They felt the
need for heroes precisely because they lived under conditions that made
them unnecessary. “Instinctively they clung to ancient history as though con­
scious that of all the misfortunes that could befall the national character, the
greatest would be the loss of the established ideals which alone ennobled hu­
man weakness.” 67 (Obviously Adams would not easily be persuaded by Bertolt
Brecht’s remark that happy is the nation that needs no heroes. That may be
too much to expect from one who came from such a distinguished lineage.)

But there might be compensation. “In a democratic ocean science could
see something ultimate. Man could go no further. The atom might move,
but the general equilibrium could not change.” Adams could not completely
commit himself to this idea, however, saying that whether the scientific or
heroic view of history prevailed, the chief object of study remained the na­
tional character. Whether as heroes or types, the figures of history must repre­
sent the people. “American types were especially worth study if they were to
represent the greatest democratic evolution the world could know. Readers
might judge for themselves what share the individual possessed in creating
or shaping the nation, but whether it was small or great, the nation could be
understood only by studying the individual. For that reason, in the story of
Jefferson and Madison individuals retained their old interest as types of char­
acter, if not as sources of power.” 68

The principal trait of the people was antipathy to war; such a people
could hardly be expected to develop great administrative skill, and yet “the
Americans prided themselves chiefly on their political capacity.” Even the
abundant evidence of the war did not remove this delusion. In spite of that,
“That incapacity in national politics should appear as a leading trait in Amer-
ican character was unexpected by Americans, but might naturally result from their conditions."

As has already been discussed, where Americans did shine was in their technological abilities, particularly when adapted to warfare. But these national traits told little about whether the native intelligence of Americans was of a high order or whether it led to a high morality. "Probably the political morality shown by the government and by public men during the first sixteen years of the century offered a fair gauge of social morality. . . . Time alone would decide whether it would result in a high or a low national ideal."

Adams then sums up. "A vast amount of conservatism still lingered among the people; but the future spirit of society could hardly fail to be intelligent, rapid in movement, and mild in method." And then ominously, once more echoing Tocqueville, Adams adds, "If at any time American character should change, it might as probably become sluggish as revert to the violence and extravagances of Old-World development. The inertia of several hundred million people, all formed in a similar social mold, was as likely to stifle energy as to stimulate evolution."

But this is not the end. As at the start, Adams has questions to ask, questions that, as Levenson says, were unanswerable by science and unanswered by history. These questions conclude Adams's magnum opus:

The traits of American character were fixed. . . . They were intelligent, but what paths would their intelligence select? They were quick, but what solution of insoluble problems would quickness hurry? They were scientific, and what control would their science exercise over their destiny? They were mild, but what corruptions would their relaxations bring? They were peaceful, but by what machinery would their corruptions be purged? What interests were to vivify a society so vast and uniform? What ideals were to ennoble it? What object, besides physical content, must a democratic continent aspire to attain? For the treatment of such questions, history required another century of experience.

The importance of these questions is obvious, but at the same time, they are more than a little disingenuous. Adams published them in 1891, seventy-four years after the time about which they were raised. They had, in fact, been at least partially answered by history. Adams knew more than a little about the corruptions that would afflict Americans and how they would deal, or not deal, with them. His thoughts on this subject are considered in the next chapter, but first it is important to consider the philosophy of history.
that began to emerge out of his great study of the Jefferson and Madison administrations.

**Toward a Philosophy of History**

It is only later in his career that Adams develops a full-scale philosophy of history. However, the germs of that theory are evident in the pages of his accounts of Jefferson and Madison: the decline of the heroic individual shaping history by force of will; the idea that in democratic societies, only science can account for the important role of the collective people; and a growing, though still muted, interest in evolution. The discussion of the impact of Darwin and Spencer on his thought can best be left aside for the time being, though a few words of summary can be offered on the other topics.

The interest in science is evident early on. In 1862 he wrote to his brother Charles, “Man has mounted science, and is now run away with. I firmly believe that before many centuries more, science will be the master of man. The engines he will have invented will be beyond his strength to control. Some day science may have the existence of mankind in its power, and the human race commit suicide, by blowing up the world.” A little over a year later, again writing to Charles, his scientific speculations grow more specific. “The truth is everything in this universe has its regular waves and tides. Electricity, sound, the wind, and I believe every part of organic nature will be brought someday within this law . . . [and] as I entertain a profound conviction of the littleness of our kind, and of the curious enormity of creation, I am quite ready to receive with pleasure any basis for a systematic conception of it all . . . I look for regular tides in the affairs of man, and, of course, in our own affairs.”

Given this cast of mind, it is not surprising that Adams’s interpretation of American history concludes with a sharp focus on the national character, which he takes to be the proper object of analysis in any democratic society. A large number of people provides a sufficient $N$, as statisticians call it, to be able to make scientific generalizations of the sort Adams wanted. That said, large statistical samples have hardly brought the scientific advances that modern social analysts hoped for. And as for Adams, the pull of the humanist was very strong throughout all his work, even, or perhaps especially, when the force of science loomed particularly large. The compromise for Adams in the *History* is the idea that great men serve as types representative of the nation’s people, though even this does not fit easily into Adams’s schema. In his eyes,
Madison is certainly small enough to be treated as a mere type, but since the people emerge as so much greater than he, one wonders how he could be truly representative. As for Jefferson, almost the reverse is true. Regardless of his failings, he towers over the first half of the History, so that there can be no way to avoid the conclusion that Adams sees him as a great man and possessed of a character deeply fascinating to the sensitive observer. Yet even Jefferson could not control history. Its tides, particularly in a democratic society, were too strong. After all, even Napoleon, in corrupt old Europe—a setting Adams considered more conducive than democracy to heroic leadership—failed in the end. The failure of Napoleon is an apt comparison, because it suggests the theory of history expounded in Tolstoy's War and Peace. In Tolstoy's novel, neither Napoleon nor the Russian leaders have any real control over events. Those who think they know the most are more foolish than the rest. History is determined by forces beyond the control of leaders. The heroes of Tolstoy's great novel are the simple Russian peasants symbolized by Platon Karataev; stolid, phlegmatic General Kutuzov, who has the sense to wait for Napoleon to destroy himself; and the saintly Pierre Bezukov. The only truly wise characters are those who do not pretend to know what they do not know. The general outline of Adams's view is similar to Tolstoy's, though there are significant differences. Tolstoy is a devoted Rousseauian, deeply dedicated, despite his riches, to the simple life; hence the love for Platon displayed in the novel. But Adams is anything but a simple lifer, nor did Rousseau appeal to him. And Tolstoy would adamantly reject all of Adams's pretensions to science, however qualified. Moreover, Tolstoy is that strange being, an anti-intellectual intellectual. By no standard could this apply to Adams, in spite of what a reader of Mont Saint Michel and Chartres might think, though he would surely have taken malicious delight in Tolstoy's hilarious burlesque of standard historical accounts centered on the hero. What Adams does share with Tolstoy is a sense of the overwhelming complexity of human life. It is not ill will that causes Jefferson to betray his principles. To a great extent, Jefferson is redeemed in spite of his many flaws because he means well. But goodwill is not enough to master the forces of history. This is why even a highly principled leader, let alone one sometimes beset by character weaknesses, will find it difficult, if not impossible, to implement his ideals.

As William Merrill Decker suggests, the fact of moral failure is frequently evident, but its inevitability does not break out too often in the book. However, Adams draws out the scientific, deterministic lessons of his history more explicitly in his letters, perhaps revealing more clearly there how frustrated
he is by the failure of the Jeffersonians to elevate the people they led. Writing to Samuel Tilden, Adams says, “I am at times almost sorry that I ever undertook to write their history, for they appear like mere grass-hoppers, kicking and gesticulating, on the middle of the Mississippi River. There is no possibility of reconciling their theories with their acts, or their extraordinary foreign policy with dignity. They were carried along on a stream which floated them after a fashion without much regard to themselves.” More theoretically, he adds, “My own conclusion is that history is simply social development along the lines of weakest resistance, and that in most cases the line of weakened resistance is found as unconsciously by society as by water.”

But Adams, like most writers who profess some form of determinism, is unable to accept fully the logic of his own theory. This accounts for the full treatment received by true heroes, for good or ill, such as Napoleon or even Jefferson, and it allows him to slight “mediocrities” such as Madison. As Decker brilliantly suggests, this may be why Adams ends the last volume of the series with a set of questions to be answered in the future, rather than a more resounding conclusion. “It is thus,” he argues, “that Adams suspends what had been his problem all along: his practical inability to treat human history as the amoral, dehumanized force field it is required to be by the inquiry he prophesies but never practices.” This also is his way of trying to escape Tolstoy’s dilemma, the dilemma, in Isaiah Berlin’s terms, of a fox consumed by his boundless knowledge of the frailties inherent in the human condition but who wanted to be a hedgehog, able to find one great idea that would allow him to reconcile his vast store of information with some moral ideal. It remains to be discussed whether Adams succeeded in avoiding this problem throughout the rest of his long career.

It is also important to see that Adams’s disappointment at the failure of Jefferson and Madison to elevate the people is much less a move to disparage the people than it is a comment on the failings of their upper-class leaders. And the Jeffersonians, however inept, devious, cowardly, or mendacious, get off lightly compared with their ultra-Federalist opponents, their ancient enemies, and also, of course, the Adams family foes. Commenting on the Burr conspiracy, Adams notes that the Federalists, who constituted almost the whole of fashionable society, professed disbelief in the existence of the conspiracy. And well they might, because “Burr’s conspiracy, like that of Pickering and Griswold, had no deep roots in society, but was mostly confined to a circle of well-born, well-bred, and well-educated individuals, whose want of moral sense was one more proof that the moral instinct had little to do with social distinction.” No argument that Adams was an antidemocratic misanthrope
can stand against comments like these. At most, Adams shows a skepticism about human nature, perhaps a residual Puritanism, that applies to all classes. It emerges, in Adams's narrative, when he considers the most virulent forms of behavior in upper-class leaders who are likely to be in a position to do harm. But Adams, in spite of his skepticism, is ever the moralist with the New England conscience, a conscience easily visible behind the facade of positivist history and always ready to pass judgment. Surely this is part of the greatness of the History.