Chapter 4
Secession, Capitalism, and Corruption

In the *History*, Adams lays a massive empirical and theoretical foundation for the interpretation of American development and begins to grope toward a more general philosophy of history. However, the period from the end of the Madison administration until after the Civil War receives comparatively little attention in Adams's published writings. Perhaps this is because he felt, as he claims in the *Education*, that between his friend John Hay's biography of Lincoln and his own history of the Jefferson and Madison administrations, most of the American history worth writing had been written. There are passing comments on the presidency of Andrew Jackson and some discussion of the evils of slavery and secession, but there is no sustained analysis until the postwar journalism on politics and finance and the remarks on those subjects in the *Education*; the novel *Democracy* is also interesting from the perspective of political theory, though as a novel it leaves something to be desired. (His second novel, *Esther*, is also of interest in connection with the relation of science to religion and with his general philosophy.) The journalism is selective in its coverage but is of a very high standard and is worth reading to this day, both for historical information and for Adams's mordant commentary and the often highly polemical, sometimes over-the-top style, which reveals a good deal of his political thought. Of course, one can also learn a great deal from the *Education*, but by the time he wrote it, Adams had abandoned history as such and offers instead a highly introspective, not to say idiosyncratic, commentary not just on events but even more on the life of his own very complex mind. In the *Education*, we can see a speculative interpretation of American history, as well as speculation on the fate of the world, but without the massive supporting evidence presented in the multiple volumes on Jefferson and Madison. Perhaps, in some sense, Adams has earned our trust with the massive *History*. In any case, we should not miss the supporting empirical structure in the *Education*, since the result is one of the great masterpieces of American thought and literature. And, for all the sketchiness of his post-Madison historical writing, there are still many points worthy of note. While he offers no general theory or systematic history of the United States after 1817, he does offer
interesting ideas about the relation of the slave power to the Civil War, the emergence of large-scale industrial capitalism with its attendant corruption, and the rise of empire. This important material reflects a well-developed worldview.

From Madison to the Civil War

Andrew Jackson claimed to be a successor of Jefferson, but he receives none of the indulgence Adams sometimes allowed his great predecessor. If Jefferson was an old Adams family friend, Jackson was an old family enemy. There was great bitterness in the relations between John Quincy Adams and Jackson, growing out of Adams’s disputed victory over Jackson in the election of 1824 and the triumph of Jackson in 1828. Moreover, Jackson stood for much that the Adams family found deeply distasteful. The principal commentary on Jackson appears in an odd form, namely, a review of a lecture by the German historian Gustav von Holst that consists almost entirely of quotes from its subject. Since Adams allows von Holst to speak for him, one is tempted to assume that he must have endorsed von Holst’s very harsh conclusions. Noting that Jackson had won a plurality of both the popular and the electoral vote in the 1824 election, von Holst points out that Jackson’s contention was that in choosing John Quincy Adams as president, the House of Representatives had “presumed to trample upon the will of the people,” a point loudly echoed by those same people. But, he continues, the more fundamental will of the people lies in the Constitution. Jackson’s position “demanded the subordination of the well-considered popular will, which had been fixed as a permanent fundamental law, to the momentary wish of the people, which in part could only be ascertained by unsafe conjectures.” Thus the considered will of the people, von Holst contended, was for indirect election, with the House of Representatives deciding in the case of failure to win a majority. For von Holst, it followed that since the people had established the Constitution, any charges of an undemocratic system must be laid at the feet of the people themselves. And, even more contentiously, if Jackson’s election four years later was a triumph of true democracy, “it was a victory of the people over their own self-appointed provisions,” an argument that makes no sense, since Jackson won the election of 1828 via the procedures prescribed by the Constitution.

The president’s character is treated with similar sharpness. “Since Louis XIV, the maxim l’etat c’est moi has hardly found a second time so naively complete expression as in Andrew Jackson.” And combining his animosity
toward Jackson with his derisive attitude toward the American people, von Holst goes on, "As Washington was the incorporation of the best traits of the people, Jackson was the incorporation of all its typical traits." Not surprisingly then, von Holst had particular scorn for the Jacksonian idea of the president as tribune of the people. No one had conceived the possibility that the president might become the defender of the Constitution against Congress. That role was reserved to the judicial branch. "The Constitution knows a President only as a bearer of the executive power; of a 'direct representative of the American people' it knows nothing. Hence, too, it knows nothing of a choice of President 'by the people.'" 

However, in spite of appearances, it is unwise to conclude too easily that Adams's mode of presentation implies endorsement of von Holst's strictures. Von Holst's argument certainly reflects Adams's constitutional purism, discussed in more detail later, and doubtless no member of the Adams clan felt any warm regard for the old general. Still, as is already clear from the History, Adams displays none of the hostility to the American common man that is evident in von Holst's essay. If anything, in the History, Adams argues that it is political elites who have failed the people. Thus, the strange "review" of von Holst's pamphlet remains a mysterious anomaly. Probably we should see the piece as a straightforward report on the content of von Holst's remarks, for whatever they are worth, and be wary of reading very much of Adams's own beliefs into it. Given the absence of any commentary by Adams, this seems the safest course.

The Civil War

It is a pity we have so little else from Adams on the period from the end of the Madison administration to the end of the Civil War. That Adams had a hearty dislike of the slave system and the Old South, always with the somewhat partial and grudging exception of Jefferson, is already clear. The political influence of the "slave power" did not admit of any "defense or palliation." The great curse was that "slavery warped the Constitution itself in a manner that for the time amounted to absolute perversion." 

The closest Adams comes to a systematic treatment of the events leading to the war is in his brief, and very polemical, biography of John Randolph, published in 1882. This book gives an early look at one of the central theses of the History, the idea that the Jeffersonians capitulated to the Federalist idea of centralization, though they did so, ironically, as the Federalists embraced decentralization and secession. Adams clearly thought that Southern leaders
such as Randolph bore a heavy burden of responsibility for this development and for the outbreak of war, a process in which Randolph is cast in a particularly villainous role. According to Adams, Randolph was behind the perversion of the essentially sound doctrine of states’ rights, which in 1800 was a mere “fragment of republican dogma.” Oddly, for a nationalist member of a strongly nationalist family, Adams pays lip service to the states’ rights doctrine. Initially, the Jeffersonians were at least sincere in their beliefs. “The constitution of the republican party was the federalists constitution read backward, like a medieval invocation of the devil; and this was in many respects and for ordinary times the best and safest way of reading it,” though it was quickly abandoned as anything other than a party shibboleth. Of course, one should be skeptical of Adams’s apparent endorsement of Jeffersonian constitutional theory. Given his propensity for irony and his apparent rejection of those ideas in the History, it is probable that Adams should not be taken literally on this issue. But, be that as it may, Adams takes seriously the Virginian’s claim that the election of 1800 marked a new era. Adams writes that in Jefferson’s mind, “what had gone before was monarchism; what came after was alone true republicanism. However absurdly this doctrine may have sounded to northern ears, and to men who knew the relative character of New England and Virginia, the still greater absurdities of leading federalists lent some color of truth to it.”

Nevertheless, as Adams saw it, the Jeffersonian reforms remained largely on the surface, leaving the legislative and executive branches substantially unchanged and fearing to make basic constitutional change, thus leaving in place the “terrible” necessary and proper clause. Once again, though he delivers this judgment in the most straightforward way, it is hard to read this without suspecting irony.

But the Jeffersonians quickly threw away their principles when they welded the slave power and states’ rights together. When these doctrines were combined, the slave power became dominant, and the list of its triumphs was long: “The slave power, when in control, was a centralizing influence, and all the most considerable encroachments on states’ rights were its acts. The acquisition and admission of Louisiana; the embargo; the war of 1812; the annexation of Texas ‘by joint resolution;’ the war with Mexico, declared by the mere announcement of President Polk; the Fugitive Slave Law; the Dred Scott decision,” all these destroyed the “very memory of states’ rights as they existed in 1789.” This was a “prostitution” of states’ rights “begun by Randolph, and only at a later time consummated by Calhoun.” Thus, “Randolph organized the South. Calhoun himself learned his lesson from the speeches.
of this man." In this perhaps somewhat hyperbolic formulation, the slave power emerges as the principal force behind much of American historical development in the first half of the nineteenth century.

It is no accident that the chapter in the *Education* dealing with 1860–1861 is called simply "Treason." A brief summary of Adams's views appears in his *Life of Gallatin*:

In fact, the politics of the United States from 1830 to 1849 offered as melancholy a spectacle as satirists ever held up to derision. Of all the parties that have existed in the United States, the famous Whig party was the most feeble in ideas and the most blundering in management; the Jacksonian democracy was corrupt in its methods; and both, as well as society itself, were deeply cankered with two desperate sores: the enormous increase of easily acquired wealth, and the terribly rapid growth of slavery and the slave power.

This passage gives a good idea of the depths of the midcentury crisis. But although Adams offers some interesting brief comments in an essay published in 1876, we have from him no really deep analysis of the causes of the war, other than his deep dislike of the "slave power conspiracy," nor even any careful assessment of Abraham Lincoln. This last omission is particularly strange. To an extent, this may be due to the fact that throughout the war, Adams was in London as secretary to his ambassador father and so did not see Lincoln up close, in action, as president. It may also reflect his prejudice against the West from which Lincoln sprang. But there may be a more directly personal reason for his near-total silence on Lincoln. In spite of his somewhat feeble attempts as an activist, Adams had no love for politics, while Lincoln, in addition to his other qualities, was a great master of the political arts. Moreover, Lincoln's political concerns once intruded directly on a meeting between Lincoln and Henry's father, Charles Francis Adams. The senior Adams had not supported Lincoln for president, though he did campaign for him. Still, he was horrified when, on seeing the president in connection with his appointment as ambassador to the Court of St. James, Lincoln told him that he could thank William Henry Seward for the honor and, turning to Seward, began to discuss a post office appointment in Chicago. This was hardly politics as the often self-righteous Adams family understood it, and the incident no doubt created a bad impression of the new president.

Early on, I discussed the high idealism of the young Henry Adams. In this he participated in a family tradition of long standing. To the Adamses, mere political expediency was a mortal danger. As Charles Francis Adams wrote:
The first and greatest qualification of a statesman in my estimation, is the mastery of the whole theory of morals which makes the foundation of all human society: The great and everlasting question of the right and wrong of every act whether of individual men or collective bodies. The next is the application of the knowledge thus gained to the events of his time in a continuous and systematic way. . . . The feebleness of perception and the deliberate abandonment of moral principles in action are the two prevailing characteristics of public men. . . . No person can ever be a thorough partisan for a long period without sacrifice of his moral identity. The skill consists in knowing exactly where to draw the line.\(^\text{17}\)

This attitude toward political morality pervades the entire Adams family throughout its four generations of prominence, and the point about the moral danger of partisanship looks ahead to the character of Silas Ratcliffe in Adams’s novel *Democracy*. Clearly it fosters a strong sense of independence and a ready willingness to defy party discipline, which influenced the thought of Henry Adams as well as his brief and not very successful interventions into the political world.\(^\text{18}\) It is also an attitude that makes a political career difficult for someone who sees politics as merely “the systematic organization of hatreds.”\(^\text{19}\) A tender-hearted idealist cannot help but recoil from such an understanding of the political life, particularly given the fact that all too often it is accurate enough.

This deeply ingrained moralism created another dilemma for the members of the Adams family, or at least those of the third and fourth generations. The problem was that along with this fierce judgmental streak, which led, quite understandably, to the condemnation of slavery, came an equally deep faith in the Constitution. Though this faith stopped “this side of idolatry,” there was still a belief in the system of separation of powers, checks and balances, and federalism that dated from the time of John Adams, the founding patriarch. This led Henry’s father to oppose militant abolitionists such as William Lloyd Garrison, who had denounced the Constitution as a “covenant with death and an agreement with hell.” But surely Garrison was not entirely wrong in calling attention to the constitutional compromises with slavery; moreover, the Adamses’ attempt to fuse these two moral imperatives failed, and the family members left the Republican Party when leaders they took to be extremists assumed control.\(^\text{20}\) The irony is that, had they understood Lincoln’s position better, they would have realized that the president’s goal was to preserve the Constitution while fighting the expansion of slavery, in the expectation, right or wrong, that slavery would be extinguished if it could be
contained within the territory where it already existed. Given this, Lincoln should have been one of their best allies. Indeed, it was Lincoln's political savvy that helped hold the fragile Northern coalition together in pursuit of the end of the slavery that both he and the Adams family despised. It is odd, then, that even in describing his family's policy toward slavery, Adams does not recognize the similarity to Lincoln's approach. He comments on the differences between the radical and moderate Republican opponents, saying: "The policy of the one wing led to a violent destruction of the slave-power; perhaps by war, perhaps by a slave insurrection. The policy of the other wing was to prevent a separation in order to keep the slave-power more effectually under control, until its power for harm should be gradually exhausted and its whole fabric gently and peacefully sapped away." The latter position was essentially Lincoln's, though, as it turned out, even under Lincoln's leadership, great violence was necessary to bring an end to the primal curse of American history. It should also be pointed out that Adams is prescient in summarizing the moderate position in the same discussion where he foresees that the outcome of Civil War might cause the slave power to be "restored to its old position, perhaps at the expense of the northern tier of states."

But even the Adams family split over questions of principle. Looking on the Civil War scene from London in 1862, Henry and his father, with characteristic idealism, supported the proposal of General Hunter to enlist freedmen in the Union army. Charles Francis, Jr., from his position at the front, disagreed sharply, expressing deep-seated feelings about what he took to be the racial inferiority of the slaves. George Fredrickson contends that in this, Henry and his father did not in fact have a serious disagreement with Charles Francis, Jr. Rather, "his military experience had narrowed his perspective" while giving him contact with poor, uneducated Negroes, which "brought out the latent snobbishness and horror of equality which upper-class New Englanders living in the safety of Boston or London did not have to acknowledge." Fredrickson goes on to add that "the war was shaping a generation that would have little respect for the broad enthusiasms of their elders." The last point is essentially true. After the war, the political emphasis shifted to economic expansion, political corruption, and the emergence of empire; Reconstruction was not the only problem facing the Union after the war, though the downplaying of the position of the former slaves was to have lasting and tragic consequences. Still, during the war, Henry Adams did, in fact, support arming the slaves, and we should not be too quick to deny him his bona fides at this stage in his career.
The Postwar Revolution

And yet, in spite of his clear detestation of the slave power and his almost apocalyptic pronouncements on the need for its root-and-branch destruction, Adams rapidly lost interest in Reconstruction. As Brooks Simpson says, “Adams quickly abandoned earlier notions of revenge, military rule, and treason trials in favor of reconciling the wayward white brothers of the defeated Confederacy.” In particular, “Never did he display the slightest awareness, let alone concern, about the plight of American blacks. When he spoke of minority rights, he meant the right of white Southerners to home rule. . . . The deepest evil of Reconstruction was not the violence against blacks in the South, but the alleged violence done the constitution by Republicans seeking to protect those blacks.” Thus he could write, in this context, that “my blood boils” thinking about Reconstruction. This concern for a form of constitutional purism is characteristic of much of Adams’s thought, which sometimes leads to a rather narrow view of politics. This sense that slavery, once abolished, would cease to be a problem lies at the heart of a shrewd observation by Judith Shklar: “It never occurred to Adams that slavery was more than a wrong to be undone once and for all, that it was an ineradicable curse that would not be ended in a battle but would haunt future generations and poison the body politic.” This narrowly constitutional view of an important issue is a subject to which it will be necessary to return. Here, however, it must be said that this is a serious moral and political blind spot and is perhaps the greatest single weakness in Adams’s interpretation of the overall course of American history.

Adams offers little in the way of a systematic interpretation of the latter part of the nineteenth century, though he makes many interesting observations, and the general outline of his position is clear enough. He believes that the war touched off a seismic change in American life and politics, but the nature of that upheaval is not spelled out in detail. At least twice he alludes to the idea that the war resulted in a revolution. Writing from the perspective of 1868, he notes that the revolution of 1861 was “nearly complete” and states proudly that “for the first time in history, the American felt himself almost as strong as an Englishman.” Shortly after, and more obliquely, he notes that by then, nine-tenths of his education was useless “and the other tenth harmful,” thus signifying a tremendous change that rendered previous conceptions of politics and society obsolete. In this, Adams saw himself as typical of his time. “All parties were mixed up and jumbled together in a sort of tidal slack-water. The Government resembled Adams himself in the matter of education. All that had gone before was useless, and some of it was
This is somewhat cryptic, but if one examines his writings after the war, several things of momentous significance stand out.

There was a wave of corruption, both political and financial, that swept across the nation and was the focus of his attention for several years. This was, in Adams's view, not merely routine chicanery but rather the symptom of a profound constitutional derangement in which the all-important balance between the legislative and executive branches was upset. There was also the emergence of corporate capitalism and the social upheaval associated with it and, not least, the explosive growth of industrial technology. Later he would fear the great wave of late-nineteenth-century immigration. Closely related to all this was a crisis of democratic constitutionalism, discussed first in a brilliant essay occasioned by the bicentennial of the Constitution and then, a few years later, by the penetrating if excessively didactic novel *Democracy*. And then the movement of nineteenth-century history was climaxied by the sudden development of an empire, alluded to in the remark about the growing parity between the United States and Great Britain. The result is a sense of the emergence of inchoate, uncontrolled, and, in the end, uncontrollable change:

Society in America was always trying, almost as blindly as an earthworm, to realize and understand itself; to catch up with its own head, and to twist about in search of its tail. Society offered the profile of a long, straggling caravan, stretching loosely toward the prairies, its few score of leaders far in advance and its millions of immigrants, Negroes, and Indians far in the rear, somewhere in archaic time. It enjoyed the vast advantage over Europe that all seemed, for the moment, to move in one direction, while Europe wasted most of its energy in trying several contradictory movements at once; but whenever Europe or Asia should be polarized or oriented toward the same point, America might easily lose her lead.

Though their basic insights are not necessarily more acute, several contemporary scholars have conceptualized more concisely the momentous changes that occurred in the wake of the Civil War. Barrington Moore, along with Charles Beard, sees the Civil War and its aftermath as the last great capitalist revolution. And of course, war and Reconstruction brought about, through the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments, a profound constitutional change that still reverberates and is clearly one of the great watersheds of American history, a revolution that transformed, and is still transforming, the relations of nation, state, and individual. Although it took a
very long time to work out the full implications of this, the question became not whether the rights of sovereign states trumped individual rights but which individual rights were so fundamental as to require national protection. For Robert Wiebe, what characterizes this period is the search for order in a world in which old communities were crumbling under the force of the organizational revolution wrought by the emergence of the giant industrial corporations. For Howard Mumford Jones, this is the age of energy, not just the tremendous release of tamed physical energy but, even more, the explosive creative energy, employed for better and worse, of all manner of Americans, including the builders of the giant organizations described by Wiebe. Thus, Jones writes, by this idea “I mean the discovery, use, exploitation, and expression of energy, whether it be that of personality or of prime movers or of words.” But no one has summarized the problems that emerged more concisely than Sidney Fine:

The United States of 1900 was quite a different place from the United States of 1860, for during the intervening years America was transformed from an agricultural society into an industrialized, urbanized society. In 1860 the total capital invested in manufacturing was something over one billion dollars; by 1900 the figure had jumped to almost ten billion dollars. During the same period the number of wage earners increased from approximately 1,300,000 to about 5,300,000. By 1900 the total value of the products of manufacturing industries was almost two and one-half times as great as the total value of farm products. And whereas 16.1 per cent of the American people lived in cities of 8000 inhabitants or more in 1800, by 1900 the proportion living in such communities had increased to 32.9 per cent.

Industrialization and urbanization intensified old problems and brought with them a host of new ones. The American people had to decide what to do about slums and tenements, public health, the wages, hours, and working conditions of standard and sub-standard labor, unemployment, and increased inequalities in the distribution of wealth, railroads, and industrial combinations. Although, for the most part, the intervention of government was required for the solution of these issues, existing theories with respect to the role of the state constituted an intellectual barrier to the development of any realistic program of state action. Jeffersonian-Jacksonian liberalism was already an anachronism in the America of the years after the Civil War.

Clearly this was not the America into which Henry Adams had been born. It is little wonder that he seems to have experienced something like what we
call culture shock or that his theory of American history in his time was a little sketchy. Perhaps it is more remarkable how much he did manage to see. And, for the sake of perspective, one might raise the question, how sure can we be of the long-term historical significance of the events of our own time?

Many, though not all, of the themes mentioned here were intertwined in Adams’s work, even if in an unsystematic way. And the problems he did not take up are revealing about the nature and limitations of his thought. Perhaps it is best to consider his relevant writings more or less in chronological order, since his developing thought was closely linked to political and economic issues of his time. In some sense, like one of Michael Walzer’s connected critics, in his historical and critical writing in the decades after the Civil War, Adams does not, for all his brilliance, emerge very far from the cave so wonderfully described by Plato. His preoccupation was with the here and now rather than with developing some independent standard of political morality. The starting point for much of Adams’s concern is his disappointment, not to say disgust, with the Grant administration.

President Grant was a huge disappointment for men like Henry Adams who had supported his election and had hoped for good things from his administration. Presumably, given the disaster of Andrew Johnson’s presidency, there was indeed reason for hope, yet Adams’s brief remarks on Johnson reveal a characteristically quirky perspective. Recalling his one meeting with Johnson in the White House, Adams suggests that the president seemed utterly commonplace, and Adams felt no wish to see him again, “for Andrew Johnson was not the sort of man whom a young reformer of thirty, with two or three foreign educations, was likely to see with enthusiasm.” Yet years later, he writes that he was “surprised to realize how strong the Executive was in 1868—perhaps the strongest he was ever to see.” Today this seems a decidedly odd perspective, given the disaster that was the Johnson presidency, though it highlights how hapless Adams felt Johnson’s successors to be. In any case, Adams felt that he had every reason to be hopeful about Grant. Exploring the parallel with George Washington, Adams reasoned that a general who had organized huge numbers of men on the battlefield must know how to administer. There might be confusion in the old slave states and about the currency, “but the general disposition was good, and everyone had echoed the famous phrase: ‘Let us have peace.’”

But disillusionment soon set in, with Adams reflecting that someone as young as he was could be easily deceived. “Had Grant been a Congressman one would have been on one’s guard, for one knew the type.” Warming to his subject, Adams begins a vituperative set piece of the sort that often
appeared in the journalism of the period. Recounting that he had once urged patience on a cabinet member in his dealings with a congressman, the secretary had exploded, “You can’t use tact with a Congressman! A Congressman is a hog!” Adams professes to find this rather too harsh but is not deterred from raising the question, “If a Congressman is a hog, what is a Senator?” And he adds,

Even Adams admitted that Senators passed belief. The comic side of their egotism partly disguised its extravagance, but faction had gone so far under Andrew Johnson that at times the whole Senate seemed to catch hysterics of nervous bucking without apparent reason. Great leaders, like Sumner and Conkling, could not be burlesqued; they were more grotesque than ridicule could make them; even Grant, who rarely sparkled in epigram, became witty on their account; but their egotism and facetiousness were no laughing matter. They did permanent and terrible mischief, as Garfield and Blaine, and even McKinley and John Hay, were to feel. The most troublesome task of a reform president was that of bringing the Senate back to decency.

Adams saw little hope that a career politician could accomplish such a Herculean task; thus his support for Grant. Here Adams saw a role for himself, though one that seems more than a little cavalier for a constitutional purist. “He was eager to join in the fight which he foresaw as sooner or later inevitable. He meant to support the Executive in attacking the Senate and taking away its two-thirds vote and power of confirmation, nor did he much care how it should be done, for he thought it safer to effect the revolution in 1870 than to wait till 1920.”

But by simply announcing the membership of his cabinet, Grant dashed Adams’s hopes. Adams was to become inured to poor cabinet choices, but “Grant’s nominations had the singular effect of making the hearer ashamed, not so much of Grant, as of himself. He had made another total misconception of life—another inconceivable false start.” About these nominees, “Senators made no secret of saying with senatorial frankness that . . . [they] betrayed his intent as plainly as they betrayed his incompetence. A great soldier might be a baby politician.” Doubtless Adams’s disappointment was intensified by the fact that Grant’s choices made it clear that there would be no place for men of Adams’s type in the new administration. But the ambitions of Henry Adams aside, no one can claim that the Grant administration was a great success, and Adams unleashed a torrent of criticism, sometimes intemperate, but usually justified, starting with the person of the president himself.
To begin with, Adams thought the president's cabinet to be, for the most part, not only inimical to an Adams but of a quality whose only real virtue was that it promised to make his life as a literary figure cheery, since it would be an ideal object for ridicule. In particular, the name of Treasury Secretary George Boutwell suggested a "somewhat lugubrious joke." One could only look to the president and hope for the best. Still, Adams is willing to concede that Grant intended reform and that he aimed to put his administration above politics. Therefore, the main hope lay in assessing Grant's character.  

But the results of this investigation were deeply discouraging. Adams accepts the judgment of his friend, journalist Adam Badeau, that Grant "appeared as an intermittent energy, immensely powerful when awake, but passive and plastic in repose." And when Badeau took him to the White House to meet the president, Adams's own judgment was even harsher. Of the twelve presidents he had known, Grant struck him as the most "curious," noting that "a single word from Grant satisfied him that, for his own good, the fewer words he risked, the better." To drive home the point, he adds that for Grant, like Garibaldi, "the intellect counted for nothing; only the energy counted. The type was pre-intellectual, archaic, and would have seemed so even to the cave-dwellers. Adam, according to legend, was such a man." The products of Grant's mind tended to be vacuous commonplaces. His irritation rising, Adams continues that Grant "had no right to exist. He should have been extinct for ages." And to nail down the point, he puts the matter into the framework of the then fashionable theory of evolution, though not at all to the benefit of the theory: "That, two thousand years after Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar, a man like Grant should be called—and should actually and truly be—the highest product of the most advanced evolution, made evolution ludicrous. One must be as commonplace as Grant's own commonplaces to maintain such an absurdity. The progress of evolution from President Washington to President Grant, was alone evidence enough to upset Darwin."  

It is hard to overestimate the disappointment Adams felt in all this. He plaintively declares that all he wanted was someone to support; he did not even ask for office. In this, alluding to his closeness to John Hay, who was to be secretary of state in the McKinley and Theodore Roosevelt cabinets, Adams says that he was fifty years ahead of his time.  

It was in this mood that much of Adams's most important journalism was conceived. For him, the Grant administration was a turning point in American history and in his personal political hopes. In these brilliant, if often vituperative, political essays, there is no doubt that Adams deliberately planned to
make his mark by rocking the boat as hard as his formidable talent for invective allowed. Certainly this is the most colorful writing in Adams’s career. He sees the combination of political and financial chicanery so characteristic of the period as having its roots in the Civil War. It produced a new system out of the chaos, and the chaos bred life rather than the habit that comes with order, a life perhaps not unlike the release of energy seen by Howard Mumford Jones and, of course, a life not always directed to the highest ends. Part of this energy was produced because “the Civil War in America, with its enormous issues of depreciated currency and its reckless waste of money and credit by the government, created a speculative mania such as the United States, with all its experience in this respect, had never before known.” It was probably this wave of speculation that lay behind the intense dislike of the banking industry that was so marked in Adams’s work. Speaking of Hugh McCulloch, Johnson’s secretary of the treasury, he commented:

He was a banker, and towards bankers Adams felt the narrow prejudice which the serf feels toward his overseer; for he knew he must obey, and he knew that the helpless showed only their helplessness when they tempered obedience by mockery. The world, after 1865, became a banker’s world, and no banker would ever treat one who had deserted State Street, and had gone to Washington with purposes of doubtful credit, or of no credit at all, for he could not have put up enough collateral to borrow five thousand dollars of any bank in America. The banker would never trust him, and he would never trust the banker.

It was in this mood that Adams made his first sally into the field of contemporary politics and finance. This was his article “The Legal Tender Act,” published in April 1870 in the North American Review, which he proudly described as “a piece of intolerably impudent political abuse.” Here he looked back to what he saw as the origin of much of the postwar troubles. His target was the 1862 issuance of Treasury notes as legal tender, as opposed to hard currency, in violation of what Adams took to be the natural laws of economics. In his view, it was this weakening of government credit that opened the door to the speculative abuses that were to follow. But as important as these consequences were, they were perhaps no more serious to Adams than what they revealed about the quality of political leadership. Military disasters might have been expected, but 200 years of experience should, in his view, have insured against the political mistakes that were made. Sadly, however, “Among the leading statesmen then charged with responsibility, not one was by training well fitted to perform the duties of finance minister, or to guide
the financial opinions of Congress." The disaster was particularly the fault of the House of Representatives and, above all, of Thaddeus Stevens, chairman of the Ways and Means Committee. Justifying his claim to impudence, Adams comments that "Mr. Stevens was as little suited to direct the economical policy of the country at a critical moment as a naked Indian from the plains to plan the architecture of St. Peter's or to direct the construction of the Capitol, expresses in no extreme language the degree of his unfitness. That Stevens was grossly ignorant of all economical subjects and principles was the least of his deficiencies." To these had to be added dogmatism, a hot temper, and an "overbearing will."  

In addition to the deficiencies of Stevens, those of Elbridge Spaulding, chairman of an influential Ways and Means subcommittee dealing with national currency, loans, and Treasury notes and bonds, had to be considered. Spaulding did have experience and was proud to be both a banker and a legislator. But for Adams, his distrust of banks surfacing, this very qualification was part of the problem. "Had he not been a banker as well as a legislator, the Legal Tender Act might never have been enacted." An uneducated Congress led by incompetent men was a dangerous thing; this was the problem. The oddity is that those who backed the act claimed to be protecting the people from bankers and brokers by creating paper money, "which has always been and always will be the most efficient instrument ever discovered for the purposes of this very class of men." But even Adams admits that the bankers could have replied to the abuse heaped on them by pointing to the inconsistencies that disfigured the legislative arguments on behalf of the act, particularly the use of the plea of necessity to

exculpate themselves from what, without exculpation, was the wickedest vote the representatives of the people could ever give,—a vote which delivered labor to the mercy of capital; a vote which forced upon the people that as money which in no just sense was money; a vote which established as law one of the most abominable frauds which law could be prostituted to enforce,—[such legislators] were not qualified to judge of other men's patriotism, honesty, or good sense.

Regrettably, it must be said that Adams did not often display such solicitude for labor or for the people as a whole. But the problem lay deeper than even the disasters sketched here. As Adams saw it, there was, first of all, a constitutional problem, at least in the minds of some legislators. Whether a strict interpretation of the Constitution allowed the issuance of paper money was
not the major issue for him, which may be just as well, since McCulloch v. Maryland seems to have settled that point. Rather, the real issue lay "beneath the letter of the Constitution,—to the principles upon which all government and all society must ultimately rest. This is the sum-total of the argument against legal tender; and this argument rests on the maxim that the foundation of law is truth." And this meant, in the words of Senator William Pitt Fessenden, that paper money "encourages bad morality" and "must inflict a stain upon the national honor." Two things stand out here. One is obviously the characteristically stern Adams morality. The other is the faith in the soundness of orthodox economics, which, ironically, became one of the foundational claims of the plutocracy Adams so detested, thus opening a contradiction in Adams’s critique of politics and finance that he never quite succeeded in overcoming.

With this assessment of the Civil War roots of the postwar disorder in mind, we can turn to Adams’s notable article “The Session” and its sequel “Civil Service Reform,” both published in 1869. Adams consciously modeled these articles on those discussing Parliament published annually in London by Lord Robert Cecil. Adams hoped that his yearly article would be “a power in the land,” a power that he hoped would exercise “a distinct influence on public opinion by acting on the limited number of cultivated minds.” And, in another display of self-congratulation, Adams proclaims that, “For once I have smashed things generally.” In some ways foreshadowing a more vituperative Theodore Lowi excoriating contemporary interest-group politics, Adams writes:

the boiling and bubbling of this witches cauldron, into which we have thrown the newt and toe of frog and all the venomous ingredients of corruption, and from which is expected to issue the future and more perfect republic,—in short the conflict and riot of interests, grow more and more overwhelming; the power of obstructionists grows more and more decisive in the same proportion as the business to be done increases in volume; the effort required to accomplish necessary legislation becomes more and more serious; the machine groans and labors under the burden, and its action becomes spasmodic and inefficient. The capacity of our government to reconcile these jarring interests, to control refractory dissentients, and to preserve an appearance of governing, is already tested to the utmost.

The late congressional session Adams discussed revealed to him that the flaws in the system were structural and that the legislative machinery itself
must be reformed. The major issues before the country were simply not being addressed. Of these, Reconstruction had to come first, but far too optimistically, Adams believed that it was losing much of its salience because the general prosperity, combined with the results of the 1868 election, was causing the South to turn its attention to more profitable things. Though there was little in the Fifteenth Amendment to which he could object, he thought that it would be of little importance. Its major danger lay in the possible incentive for Congress to abuse its powers in enforcing it.  

More serious, in Adams's view, was the threat to executive power posed by the egregious Tenure of Office Act, which allowed the Senate to interfere with the president's power to remove executive officers. The Senate, though then not a popularly elected body, was in a position to do great damage to the separation of powers system by attempting to capitalize on the mistakes of the other branches of government. But mere repeal would not be enough. Clearly the executive branch would have to put its house in order. And, as already noted, the most troublesome task was to bring the Senate to heel.

But the tariff issue was at least as important. The tariff was economically wasteful, but the nation was young and strong enough to withstand the loss, as well as the fact that under it the rich were getting richer and the poor were getting poorer. Again, the real danger was not the economic consequences but “the debauching effect of the system upon parties, public men, and the morals of the State.” Adams continues with a ringing indictment:

The condition of parties precludes the chance of reform. The “rings” which control legislation—those iron, or whiskey, or Pacific Railway, or other interests, which have their Congressional representatives, who vote themselves the public money—do not obtain their power for nothing. Congressmen themselves, as a class, are not venal, it is true. Perhaps not more than one member in ten of the late Congress ever accepted money. But though Congress itself has still a sense of honor, party organizations have no decency and no shame. The “rings” obtain their control of legislation by paying liberally towards the support of these party organizations, Republican or Democratic, as the case may be.  

In these conditions, the power of parties grows “dictatorial.”

The article “Civil Service Reform,” published in the October 1869 issue of the North American Review, is a direct extension of “The Session.” Had it not been for the fact that the resulting piece would have been too long, the two articles would have been published together. Once again, the analysis is
concerned with what Adams took to be a structural problem. The focus is again not on corruption but on the Constitution, or rather the derangement of constitutional powers in the postwar period. The basic principle being violated is to be found in the Massachusetts Constitution, written, as Adams does not say, by his great-grandfather. "In the government of this Commonwealth, the legislative department shall never exercise the executive and judicial powers, or either of them; the executive shall never exercise the legislative and judicial powers, or either of them: to the end it may be a government of laws and not of men." 

When Grant took office, Adams was willing to concede that he intended a nonpartisan administration. Indeed, in his first cabinet appointments, Grant attempted to build a group that was free of political entanglements. But this attempt failed, and he was forced to reconstruct, though even here, only one member was chosen more for his representation of Republican Party interests than of the Republic as a whole. Where Grant capitulated—though, Adams concedes, not without struggle—was in the inferior cabinet appointments.

But, Adams argues, this was not always the practice followed in the history of American government. From Washington to Jackson's time, "The President represented not a party, nor even the people either in a mass or in any of its innumerable divisions, but an essential part of the frame of government; that part which was neither legislature nor judiciary; a part in which the nature of society must of necessity exist,—which in the United States was intentionally and wisely made a system by itself, in order to balance the other parts of the structure." Even Jackson's spoils system did not destroy this essential balance, because in his attitude toward the Senate, he upheld the rights of the executive.

However, weaker men did less well. Adams sees an unwritten law according to which the Senate is the "nervous system of the great extra-constitutional party organizations." The Senate became the seat of party intrigue, "and when the party organizations discovered that their power would be greatly increased by controlling the executive patronage, the Senate lent its overruling influence to effect this result, and soon became through its individual members the largest dispenser of patronage." Adams says that this nefarious practice reached new heights in the recent administration of Andrew Johnson and concludes that we must "confront face to face the bald and disgusting fact that members of Congress cannot be honest with such a power in their hands.

Adams's great theme is the necessity to restore the proper balance between the legislative and executive branches. No particular way out is clear to Adams. His major suggestion reflects some real confidence in the people,
since it is essentially populist in character. “Nothing remains but to act outside all party organizations, and to appeal with all the earnestness that the emergency requires, not to Congress nor to the President, but to the people, to return to the first principles of government, and to shut off forever this source of corruption in the state.” And this faith in average voters is restated near the conclusion of the essay. “If the President is weak, it is merely because public opinion is silent and support is not to be found. Arouse this, and there will be no danger that the President will prove indifferent to the duty of protecting the purity of his administration, or that politicians within Congress or elsewhere will assume an authority which belongs not to a man nor to any body of men, but to laws alone.” And yet again, to hammer home the point, Adams proclaims, “the true policy of reformers is to trust neither to Presidents nor to senators, but appeal directly to the people.” Not for the first time, it must be remarked that these are decidedly not the words of an antidemocratic snob. The Republic can be saved if only the people can be mobilized.

But if Adams’s argument on civil service reform is made on the high level of principle, his 1870 discussion of the attempt by Jay Gould and James Fisk to corner the gold market goes right to the inside of a sordid conspiracy reaching deep into the Grant administration. Here Adams’s language in his assault on the conspirators was so flamboyant as to force him to publish the results of his investigation in England, for fear of running afoul of the libel laws; even in London, some publishers were hesitant to put the article in print. Gould and Fisk, the two “malefactors of great wealth,” to borrow Theodore Roosevelt’s famous imprecation, were in control of the Erie Railroad. Gould was a broker, and “a broker is almost by nature a gambler,—perhaps the last profession suitable for a railway manager. In character he was marked by a disposition for silent intrigue . . . he had not a conception of a moral principle. The class of men to whom he belonged understood no distinction between right and wrong in matters of speculation.” Fisk was “still more original in character. He was not yet forty years of age, and had the instincts of fourteen . . . Personally Fisk was coarse, noisy, boastful, ignorant, the type of a young butcher in appearance and mind.” And of the two together, Adams writes, “Over this wealth and influence,—greater than that directly swayed by any private citizen, greater than is absolutely and personally controlled by most kings, and far too great for public safety either in a democracy or in any other form of society,—the vicissitudes of a troubled time placed two men in irresponsible authority; and both these men belonged to a low moral and social type.”

Once again the root of the trouble was in the speculative mania unleashed by the Civil War. The details are of considerable complexity and
need not detain us. Suffice it to say that “the effects of President Grant’s character showed themselves. They were startling—astounding—terrifying.” And through these defects, “Gould was led by the change at Washington into the belief he could safely corner gold without interference from the Government.” Though the scandal did not touch the president directly, it did reach deep into his administration and into his family as well. Congressman Garfield, a good friend of Adams, conducted a congressional investigation, but the committee took a quantity of evidence which it dared not probe, and refused to analyze. Although the fault lay somewhere on the Administration, and could lie nowhere else, the trail always faded and died out at the point where any member of the Administration became visible. Everyone dreaded to press inquiry. Adams himself feared finding out too much. He found out too much already, when he saw in evidence that Jay Gould had actually succeeded in stretching his net over Grant’s closest surroundings, and that Boutwell’s incompetence was the bottom of Grant’s calculation. . . . The ways of Wall Street were dark and double. 74

But scandal aside, even including the discussion of Gould’s ties to Boss Tweed’s Tammany, the corruption of judges, and the bribes offered, what is theoretically most interesting in Adams’s article is his tracing the root of the problem to the emergence of the modern corporation. What he feared was the creation of “a system of quiet but irresistible corruption, [which] will ultimately succeed in directing government itself. Under the American form of society no authority exists capable of effective resistance.” Adams concludes, “The corporation is in its nature a threat against the popular institutions spreading so rapidly over the whole world. Wherever a popular and limited government exists this difficulty will be found in its path; and unless some satisfactory solution of the problem can be reached, popular institutions may yet find their existence endangered.” 75 To this day, in spite of much effort since Adams’s time, no solution has been found. As Charles E. Lindblom concludes, democracy and the corporation simply do not fit. 76 As is so often the case, Adams is dismayingly prescient.

Adams’s final foray against the Grant administration is in the second of his “Session” articles, published in the North American Review for July 1870. As usual, Adams hoped to make a splash, and this time succeeded. This piece was reprinted by the Democratic Party as a campaign pamphlet in the 1872 presidential election and earned him a response from Senator Timothy Howe.
of Wisconsin, who, along the way, called him a “begonia,” a flower notable, says Adams, for “curious and showy foliage; it was conspicuous; it seemed to have no use or purpose; and it insisted on standing always in the most prominent positions. Adams would have greatly liked to be a begonia in Washington.” Elsewhere he rejoiced, “To be abused by a Senator is my highest ambition, and I am now quite happy. My only regret is that I cannot afford a Senator to abuse me permanently. That, however, might pall in time.”

In spite of the political uses of the second “Session” article, Adams’s piece is less flamboyant than others of the same period. The most important subject he considers is yet again the profound constitutional derangement that he felt was firmly in place by the early days of the Grant administration. The starting point of the discussion is a comparison of European and American ideas on sovereignty. European thinkers such as Blackstone had long argued that all governments must rest on a supreme, final, absolute, and uncontrolled authority. Americans, in contrast, denied this principle, believing that there was no need for a supreme power and that none could be allowed to exist, for such a power was inimical to freedom. Liberty depended on “denying uncontrolled authority to the political system in its parts or in its whole.” It was this that led to the reservation of certain powers to the states and, within the national government, the elaborate system of separation of powers with checks and balances to deter the abuse of power. Perhaps the purposes of the framers were chimerical, and “the hopes then felt were almost certainly delusive”:

Yet persons who grant the probable failure of the scheme, and expect the recurrence of the great problems in government which were then thought to be solved, cannot but look with satisfaction at the history of the Federal Constitution as the most convincing and the most interesting experiment ever made in the laboratory of political science, even if it demonstrates the impossibility through its means.

The Civil War had virtually “obliterated” the Constitution as originally conceived, but as noted before, Adams felt that there was reason for hope in a Grant presidency, though these hopes were rudely dashed almost at once. We hear again a litany of Grant’s intellectual deficiencies. He was a president with a very limited sense of presidential duties, which he thought consisted largely in faithful administration, honest tax collection and disbursement of funds, and rigorous obedience to the law, whether good or bad, especially insofar as it was expressed by congressional enactments. He thought, in other words, like the commander in chief of an army in peacetime. But a president,
in Adams's view, needed to offer more. He must be able to see a connection between ideas and acts, in other words, to have a policy. Merely to proclaim “Let us have peace” was not enough.\textsuperscript{30}

The result, necessarily, in Adams’s view, was not a policy but a nonpolicy of drift. The basic structural problems of the system were not being addressed:

The steady process by which power was tending to centralization in defiance of the theory of the political system; the equally steady tendency of this power to accumulate in the hands of the Legislature at the expense of the Executive and the Judiciary; the ever-increasing encroachments of the Senate, the ever-diminishing efficiency of the House, all the different parts and processes of the general movement which indicated a certain abandonment of the original theory of the American system, and a no less certain substitution of a method of government that promised to be both corrupt and inefficient,—all these were either to be fixed upon the country beyond recall, or were to be met by a prompt and energetic resistance.\textsuperscript{81}

Adams concludes in an outburst of constitutional despair. Somewhat surprisingly for one with his nationalist proclivities, he worries that the powers once reserved to the states will now be granted them only on good behavior and with the consent of Congress. It is clear to him that “the original basis of reserved powers on which the Constitution was framed has yielded and is yielding to natural pressure,” to an extent that “there is little doubt that the great political problem of all ages cannot, at least in a community like that of the future America, be solved by the theory of the American Constitution.” The second great lesson he draws is that “the system of separate responsibility realized in the mechanism of the American government as a consequence of its jealous restriction of substantial powers, will inevitably yield, as its foundation has yielded, to the pressure of necessity. The result is not pleasant to contemplate.” And in a great anticlimax that is, unfortunately, not uncharacteristic of Adams, he adds that “it is not here intended to suggest principles of reform.”

This is perhaps the darkest expression of constitutional depression in this period of Adams’s career. But in 1876, only six years after his deeply pessimistic last “Session” article, in his finale as a political journalist, he takes a more benign view of the broad outlines of American constitutional history. In the final issue of the \textit{North American Review} published under his editorship, he offers two articles. One is his first sustained attempt to generalize about the course of American history, and the other is a commentary on the
role of independents in politics. Once again, the German scholar Gustav von Holst appears on the scene, this time in the form of Adams’s lengthy review of the first volume of von Holst’s history of the United States. Written with his student Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr., as an assistant, the conclusion of the essay constitutes what Adams referred to as his Centennial Address. Along the way, he roams through a good deal of American history, anticipates some of the themes of his great work on Jefferson and Madison, and answers some of von Holst’s harsh criticism of the United States.

Von Holst’s first major point is that the American revolutionary statesmen were unclear in their ideas of what constituted a nation. Aside from Alexander Hamilton, who saw the inevitable failure of a confederation, the nature of a state was a deep mystery to the Framers. Thus the failure of the Articles of Confederation was inevitable, a situation that led to the Constitution of 1787. And of that Constitution von Holst writes, “The historical fact is, that the Constitution had been ‘extorted from the grinding necessity of a reluctant people.’”

Yet, in spite of this, von Holst points out that the Constitution became an object of worship for Americans. As Adams notes, von Holst gives no analysis of the Constitution, though it is clear that he sees fundamental problems in it. The essence of his view, as Adams sees it, is the perception that, “in the process of converting the Confederacy into a nation, the Constitution made a convenient battle-ground on which the two old parties, States-rights men and Nationalists, could fight out their battle within a sort of self-imposed limit, much in the manner of a tournament. Under cover of the fetish worship, the old tendencies lived and throve, merely interpreting the Constitution to suit their fixed ideas.”

According to von Holst, the particularist tendencies were mostly quiet or gathering strength during the Washington administration. Disturbances such as the Whiskey Rebellion were suppressed by Hamilton with a firm hand. However, the departure of Thomas Jefferson from the cabinet and the inauguration of John Adams as president released the old provincial jealousies. The Virginia and Kentucky Resolutions were the classic symptoms of this development.

But fortunately, from von Holst’s point of view, Jefferson was too ambitious to follow his own interpretation of the Constitution, which he read as if the Constitution were perhaps even looser, and certainly no more tightly woven together, than the Articles. In fact, in a discussion that anticipates Adams’s History, Jefferson emerges as a great centralizer during his presidency, while the Federalists became particularists and flirted with secession, thus leading to the
Hartford Convention. There follows a discussion of slavery as treated in the Constitution and in subsequent policy that is roundly condemnatory and with most of which Adams can only agree. "The recapitulation of all the successive concessions to the slave power, all the steps by which the power slowly converted the national government into an instrument of its own will, is a terrible one. It is with a shudder that one turns the last page of this tremendous indictment, and yet the volume ends at the threshold of the antislavery struggle; the worst humiliations are not yet touched."

Most of the preceding discussion is simply a summary of von Holst’s argument, with much of which Adams clearly agrees. However, he is by no means uncritical of the German scholar, and the grounds of his criticism shed considerable light on Adams’s constitutional theory, his understanding of American history, and his ideas about the potential of the democratically organized people.

Adams sees that von Holst understands the basic problem facing American statesmen. “That problem was how to weld thirteen ‘sovereign states’ into a nation without appealing to force.” Having said this, Adams notes that von Holst suffers from the European difficulty of perceiving confusion in the American mind on the subject of the state. But Americans deny that confusion, says Adams; they see the thirteen colonies as separate entities believed to be good in and of themselves. American statesmen were not doctrinaires, and they saw clearly that the distinctiveness of the states was a simple fact that had to be dealt with. Of necessity, the constitutional compromise had to be tentative and subject to adjustment when the extent of the sacrifice required of the state governments became clear. American leaders were not confused in their ideas; it was the facts they had to deal with that were confused. Happily, they did not approach the problem from an abstractly theoretical point of view. Even Hamilton, so much admired by von Holst, refused to break with the American past. Hamilton understood that the notion that “two supreme powers cannot act together is false. They are inconsistent only when aimed at each other or at one indivisible object.” The question, then, was whether the practical solution adopted to deal with the intractable realities of American society worked.

Von Holst understood that nullification and secession were not the product of slavery “but run through the whole century of our history as its particular ear-mark.” What he did not understand was that this was not the fault of the Constitution. “Had there been no particularist feeling, there would have been no need of a closer union; the task of the Constitution would have been already performed.” Again, the real question was how well the Constitution
had worked. It is true, says Adams, that the Jeffersonians switched places with the Hamiltonians, but the real concern cannot be with the inconsistencies of individuals but with the effect of these inconsistencies on government. The central thing for Adams is this:

What was established as law by Washington was respected as law by Jefferson. The precedents established as law by the Federalist administrations were accepted and enlarged by the Republican administrations. That Jefferson should have exercised as President powers more questionable than any of those which he had triumphantly assailed his predecessors for wielding, may prove that Jefferson was an unscrupulous politician, but it also proves, what is of far more consequence to the world, that the American political system was stronger than the individual, and that the Constitution vindicated its energy in its working. That J. Q. Adams should have been driven from power nominally because he advocated the application of national money to internal improvements, and that the application of national money to internal improvements should have continued with accelerated pace from that day to this, is only another instance of the operation of the same law.

Von Holst's charges against the Jeffersonians thus rest on the assumption that they "consistently carried out the national theory of the Constitution, at the expense of their own private consistency." But in fact, the Jeffersonian theory made no difference; whoever was in power, the authority of the executive branch increased.91

Moreover, Adams continues, the power of the legislative branch has also expanded continuously for eighty years, to an extent that began to justify the fears of anti-Federalist critics of the Constitution such as George Mason and Patrick Henry, as well as critical supporters such as Thomas Jefferson, all of whom European theorists insisted "upon branding as blockheads, because they thought they saw in the State organisms a protection against the uncontrolled despotism of the central government." If anything, the executive and legislative branches worked together almost too much to create a "more perfect union." Thus, even starting from von Holst's own position, the Constitution must be seen as a practical success because it did prevail in forming the thirteen states into one nationality.92

But this analysis contains an obvious difficulty that Adams is forced to consider—the collapse of the Constitution in the crisis leading to the Civil War. Von Holst believes that the tension between nationalism and particu-
larism is the clue to an understanding of American history. Adams does not really disagree, but he believes that the Framers and their successors were, in fact, on their way to forming a “more perfect union,” but for the development of the “slave power.” Had they contemplated that development, they would have abandoned their task in despair, for “the Constitution was not intended to be subjected to such a strain.” But this problem was not the fault of the Framers. Even von Holst understands, says Adams, that “the great development of the slave power in politics was due to economical causes which were of later origin, and the original concession made to the slaveholders in the Constitution was made on the theory that if there was any truth in the fundamental principles of human liberty, that truth was sure to vindicate itself by steadily undermining and destroying slavery.” In spite of being subjected to the full force of states’ rights tendencies, nationalism, under very unfavorable conditions, was not only gaining ground but actually conquering particularist tendencies. However, anticipating his study of John Randolph, Adams writes:

Suddenly, under the guidance of Calhoun, the slave power seized upon the old and almost exploded theory of State rights, vampéd it up, gave to it a superficial varnish of logic, and so breathed into it a new life. But that life was not due to the “inherent defect” in the Constitution in countenancing State rights, but to the unexpected development of the cotton industry. What Calhoun really defended was, not State rights, but the slave power; and what the North really had to fear was, not State rights, for if Calhoun had become President he would in all probability have been as strong a centralizer as Jefferson, but the perversion of the Constitution to the interests of slavery instead of those of freedom.93

Paradoxically, though it is not clear that he sees the paradox, Adams contends that the concessions of the North to slavery show the strength of the Constitution in forming a more perfect Union. While it was true that, as time passed, political principle was often sacrificed to nationalist passions, the Constitution nevertheless continued to do its work as it became the only instrument for preserving the Union against “colossal” peril. In his rather sanguinary view, “the Constitution did its work and … the nationality it created was so tremendous a force that at the first moment the slave power ventured to raise its hand against it, that moment the North suffocated the slave power in its own blood.” For this reason, the veneration bestowed on it is deserved. Thus, the Constitution has done its work. It has, in fact, made a nation.94
The problem with von Holst's analysis, according to Adams, is that he cannot shed his European blinders when examining the United States and that, though it may be incongruous for an Adams to remark, he set "an absolute standard so high that no people of any age or country have ever approached it." But, more importantly, von Holst missed something very deep:

If the historian will only consent to shut his eyes for a moment to the microscopic analysis of personal motives and idiosyncracies, he cannot but be conscious of a silent pulsation that commands his respect, a steady movement that resembles in its mode of operation the mechanical action of Nature herself. As one stands in the presence of this primitive energy, the continent itself seems to be the result of agencies not more unlimited in their power, not more sure in their processes, not more complete in their result, than those which have controlled the political system. [And if we can agree with Bismarck that sovereignty must be "the sovereignty of law,"] then the history of the United States during its first century is surely entitled to the credit of having developed that principle with a rigor and on a scale which is not without its majesty and pathos.

This remarkable statement contains at least two aspects that should be noted here but must be more fully discussed later. One is the intense patriotic nationalism displayed by Adams. The other is a determinist theory of forces beyond human control, which, as we have already seen, was to become a major theme, as well as a source of great intellectual tension, both in the History and in Adams's later works.

The review of von Holst, written in contrast to the many papers detailing the constitutional crisis of the Grant administration, is the high point of Adams's celebration of the potential of American constitutionalism. But at exactly the same time, in an article on the role that independents should play in the presidential campaign of 1876, Adams is notably less sanguine. If the Constitution was thriving, or at least had the potential to thrive, the party system was a disruptive force. Neither the Republican nor the Democratic Party was at all appealing. The issue of slavery had held the Republicans together. In the loyal states, "it numbered among its leaders or in its ranks a very considerable preponderance of the political virtue and intelligence, and of the disinterested public spirit of the community." Unfortunately, it also had "its train of camp followers and stragglers and adventurers... who were as loud-mouthed and repulsive a set of political vagabonds as ever canted about principles or hungered after loaves and fishes." This wing of the party was now
in the ascendancy. "Accordingly, about the time when those who never knew what a principle was had pushed their way to the front and were confidently appealing to a glorious record, those who had made the party and inspired its policy through its years of active life found themselves pondering over new issues and striking out in independent action."

The Democratic Party suffered from different defects. Adams believed that the completeness of the Republican destruction of slavery deprived the party of its occupation while re-creating that of the Democrats. Historically, the Northern branch had been the ally of the "slaveholding oligarchy." "Into it had naturally drifted the great mass of the political ignorance, corruption, and venality of the free States, and, throughout the Rebellion, it constituted simply a cowardly and traitorous opposition." A political lifetime spent under these conditions had unfitted the party for independent political action.

However, the election of 1874 had made it clear that the South was becoming a political power again, a power motivated by a desire to throw off the rule of freed slaves, which it had been the goal of Reconstruction policy to prevent. But the policies imposed by the Republicans lacked "moderation and wisdom," as tends to be the case, in Adams's view, with the victors in civil wars. In its attempt to "reconstruct" the South, he believed that the party had "fairly overstepped the bounds of moderation, and went to work to reorganize a thoroughly disorganized social, political, and industrial system on preconceived theories which were wholly at variance with actual facts. By more than accomplishing their own work they thus made work for their opponents." The South was in great need of repair, and it was the role of the Democratic Party to carry out this task. For the Republicans, it remained to "see that in the process the great results [presumably the destruction of slavery] of the war [are] not disturbed." (Adams is so critical of Reconstruction that it is important to keep in mind this last point on the role of the Republicans. He obviously has no desire to restore the status quo ante.)

Adams assumed—much too optimistically, as we look back from our perspective—that the great political issues of the preceding twenty years were no longer of much importation. His analysis would have been more rounded had he expanded the time frame from the preceding twenty years to the entire nineteenth century, during which, of course, his family had been so active in the struggle against slavery. This might have enabled him to focus on the centrality of race and slavery in the American experience. Had he done so, he might have seen the falsity of his assertion that peace, quiet, and goodwill were restored precisely in proportion to the passage of those states into Democratic control. He even dismisses the idea that the Southern states
would deprive the freed blacks of their civil rights as a conjurer’s trick. Instead of recognizing this danger, Adams holds the view that political leaders were continuing to manufacture side issues out of old and dated struggles.

The result, in his view, was that the number of people who wanted to take action independent of the established parties would inevitably grow. As he saw it, the major parties were exhausted, so it was time to go outside them to search for leaders who would address the central issues of the postwar period; the debates surrounding Reconstruction had no bearing on these new problems.

To make this point, he examines the Republican and Democratic platforms for the election of 1876 and, finding both empty, concludes that there is no real difference between the parties. He is condescending to Rutherford Hayes, the Republican candidate, a man of “good purposes, fair talents, and high character,” but insists that more than that is required to advance beyond mere local service. Thus Hayes is on the level of Franklin Pierce and John C. Frémont and far below the level of Lincoln when he was nominated for the presidency. This is faint praise indeed, considering the disastrous performance of Pierce in office. And Samuel Tilden running for the Democrats did not offer much more, though to the party’s credit, it had nominated the “most distinguished reformer in its ranks.” For the electorate and, above all, the independent-minded voter, what counted was the position of the two candidates on the key issues of the time, namely, currency reform through the resumption of specie payments, free trade, and the reduction of tariffs and, of course, civil service reform leading to appointments “during good behavior” of administrative officials below the cabinet level. Taken together, the aim of all these efforts is political purification, since the aim of all reformers is “to overcome the tendency of our political system to corruption.”

With this as a guide, no blame would attach to any civil service reformer who chose to vote for Tilden. And no matter who won, the reformers must hold the victor to the highest standard, in effect moving into the opposition, where they could do the most good. What we see then is a Constitution capable of providing the framework for good government but seriously distorted by the Senate. Thus, the deep aim of all reform is a restoration of the proper “forms and formalities” according to the Constitution as it was understood in earlier and better times, before it was debauched by Andrew Jackson. Whether this sort of formalism is enough to achieve Adams’s ends is a question to be discussed later. But first, Adams’s views of democracy must be considered. Here, when we might hope for a theoretical discourse, we get a novel.