

JOHN ADAMS

The founding father of founding fathers

by David McCullough

2001, Simon and Schuster, 656 pages

"But all the provisions that He [God] has made for the gratification of our senses... are much inferior to the provision, the wonderful provision that he has made for the gratification of our nobler powers of intelligence and reason. He has given us reason to find out the truth, and the real design and true end of our existence."— diary of John Adams ca. 1756

John Adams (1735-1826) is probably the most underrated thinker and actor participating in the birth of our nation, the birth of practical liberty (for society at large for the first time in history). The simple truth: were it not for Adam's fierce determination and hard intellectual work of persuasion at the Continental Congress in Philadelphia, 1776, independence from England would not have been declared, much less achieved.

Following the Declaration, Mr. Adams became ambassador to France helping to secure its alliance in the war; while there, on his own initiative and at considerable travail, he journeyed to the Netherlands, eventually obtaining a substantial loan to the cause that made US victory possible. While President (1798-1802) he managed to keep the United States neutral during the Anglo-Franco conflict... but authorized funds to build a navy. When war with Britain materialized in 1812, the US was able to win several decisive naval engagements— thus preventing resubordination of America by the Brits.

Oh, and probably the most vigorous and detailed presentation of what the US Constitution would become was written in a painstaking series of pamphlets by Adams, in 1787, entitled *A Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States of America*. John Adams also wrote the foundation letter for the draft of the Massachusetts constitution, *Thoughts on Government*, then later the Constitution of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, itself.

And these are only some high points.

Although my review today focuses on the incredible book by David McCullough, I also want to mention the remarkable John Adams miniseries engineered by Tom Hanks based on the book. In combination, they deliver a singular core message of who and what we are as Americans... or at least should be. [One hopes a movement has been launched to solidly install this book/miniseries into the curricula of all middle-school and high-school students in every nook of the land. (Were such an installation to have been performed decades ago, we would not today have to be facing all the pain of recovering our natural freedom against considerable opposition.)]

The miniseries was my first exposure to the life and times of this good and great man; everyone involved with the production deserves an Emmy. The principal actors—Paul Giamatti (John Adams), Laura Linney (Abigail Adams), Tom Wilkinson (Ben Franklin), Stephen Dillane (Thomas Jefferson), and David Morse (George Washington)—give career performances. You are transported to the times. Here are my comments in *The Blood of Patriots and Tyrants*:

.... Modern-day patriots will watch the second episode, *Independence*, with constant chills. Mr. Adams, his cousin Samuel, and the entire New England delegations to the Continental Congress in Philadelphia advocate forcefully that "these colonies are and of right ought to be free and independent states...." The reason I get chills... is that these are my people, and I'm awestruck by the intelligence and courage of their convictions. And I feel we mustn't betray them.

These were men of principle and action. It was a time when life for most was relatively "nasty, brutish, and short," when the journey from Boston to Philadelphia required two weeks, when the population of Philadelphia was merely 30,000 (Boston, half that), when smallpox and other diseases killed many—life expectancy was perhaps 40—and news traveled only as fast as wind and horse. How did the ideas of liberty, much more the seeds of revolution, take root in so rugged a New World? From Sam Adams to Thomas Paine (*Common Sense*) to the intellectual activists in Williamsburg, the spirit of *The Rights of Man* was breaking out all over. Adams himself put it best:

The Revolution was effected before the war commenced. The Revolution was in the minds and hearts of the people; a change in their religious sentiments, of their duties and obligations... This radical change in the principles, opinions, sentiments, and affections of the people was the real American Revolution. — John Adams

Except for the nasty, brutish, and short part, I wish I had been there.

I'm quite fond of the above quote from Mr. Adams, and include it in several of my commentaries dealing with our own time and the need for a new Enlightenment—a revolution in the way people think about life, liberty, and good government. Adam's insight is manifestly brilliant: once the mind-politic changes the body-politic follows. Further, per Victor Hugo, "...there is nothing so powerful as an idea whose time has come." [Which sends chills (of terror) down the spines of today's greater MCC (mind-control community).]

Back to the opening quote of my review, I feel it puts succinctly the way authoritarian, Puritanical New England Christianity (speaking of mind control!) had transformed into something more accommodating to freedom of thought over the 150 years leading to the Revolution. It's clear Adams, anyway, was comfortable with the notion that God wants us to consider evidence for all our beliefs, even belief in God. Else why would [It] have bothered to give us a mind? This sentiment leads readily to practical American self-reliance: "God helps those who help themselves" or "Praise the Lord but row toward shore."

Certainly, my own appreciation of the book and miniseries focuses on the ideas whose time had come: political liberty and rejection of "any form of tyranny over the mind of man." John Adams is a fascinating story of how the Colonists lived, how they thought, how they fought, and the many obstacles they faced... even among their own people. [Apparently, a major part of what drove Tom Hanks to take up the project was his learning thru McCullough's book that John Adams had had the moral courage as a young attorney to defend the British soldiers accused of the Boston Massacre (successfully, I might add). Mob hysteria was particularly prevalent in Boston often leading to barbaric acts—such as (frequently fatal) tarring and feathering—upon unfortunate victims; Adams had the guts to stand up to the rabble.]

In addition to the colonists' fight for liberty, we get to see how the country got off the ground. The early history, from roughly the end of the War for Independence to Adams' death in 1725, is completely fascinating. So many forces were arrayed against the early America: the Hamiltonian money-power crowd, extremes of Jeffersonian republicanism (some remained sympathetic to the French Revolution long after it had turned into the Reign of Terror)... slavery.

The Founding Mother

As overwhelming as the experience of the book and miniseries John Adams has been for me, simply one superlative following another, I want to point out how thoroughly heroic Abigail Adams is, as well. Not only is she John Adams' lover, muse, and best friend, she stands apart in my humble opinion as one of the best prose writers of her era—if not, like, *ever*. The miniseries provides several instances of her sage advice to John, in correspondence and in conversation—they were apart often and for long stretches in the tumultuous years 1775-1795. As for the writing, consider this letter to John and their son, John Quincy, on their departure a second time for Europe:

"These are the times in which a genius would wish to live. It is not in the still calm of life, or the repose of a pacific station, that great characters are formed. The habits of a vigorous mind are formed in contending with difficulties. Great necessities call out great virtues. When a mind is raised, and animated by scenes that engage the heart, then those qualities which would otherwise lay dormant, wake into life and form the character of the hero and the statesman."

Wow. I'm madly in love with Abigail Adams. Except, she of course cleaveth unto John... and in the tenderest manner:

"I recollect the untitled man to whom I gave my heart and in the agony of recollection, when time and distance present themselves together, wish he had never been any other. Who shall give me back my time? Who shall compensate to me those years I cannot recall? How dearly have I paid for a titled husband."

Which she wrote at the age of 39, realizing the "necessities calling out his virtues" had exacted a severe price on the familiar joys of their togetherness. Abigail writes with an uncanny combination of analytical precision and a heart the size of Mother Nature.

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So to put no finer accolades upon the matter, the world of John and Abby is enlightening, engaging, and irresistible. As for the book and miniseries, "Five stars plus, three thumbs way up," two absolute works of art for the ages. Run, don't walk, to acquire them for your collection: watch and read them regularly, let us talk constantly of them amongst ourselves.

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John Adams | Abigail Adams | War for Independence | David McCullough