

FRIENDS DIVIDED: John Adams and Thomas Jefferson A Book Review Essay

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Purpose and Author Biography

This dual biography examines the lives and legacies of two of most influential Americans of their time, John Adams and Thomas Jefferson. From their background through their demise on the same day—July 4, 1826—the book traces the similarities and stark differences between the Founding Fathers and seeks to explain why “Jefferson’s star has remained ascendant while Adams’s seems to have virtually disappeared from the firmament” (p. 5).

Author Gordon S. Wood is emeritus professor at Brown University. A prolific chronicler of the early Republic, his previous books on that period have earned the Bancroft Prize (1970) and Pulitzer Prize (1983). In 2010, he was awarded the National Humanities Medal.

Overview of Text

The text encompasses twelve chapters along with a Prologue and Epilogue. Though there is no division by section, the topics can be coalesced into four parts, including background, revolutionary activities, political careers, and reconciliation.

Chapters 1 and 2 delineate the basic traits of Adams and Jefferson and how they impacted their respective views and behavior. The two were born in different areas of the country to distinct economic circumstances. Adams was high-strung and possessed a negative attitude toward human nature, while Jefferson was easygoing and a moral idealist, according to Wood. Though Jefferson was regarded as more polite and civil, Adams was more sensuous. Whereas Jefferson had the “most encyclopedic mind of any of his fellow Americans” (p. 10), Adams was unrivaled in his visual memory. Even as both became lawyers, Adams was better at the job and enjoyed it more. Adams’s marriage to Abigail lasted 54 years and represented a true partnership; Jefferson’s wife, Martha, passed after just ten years of union, and he engaged in several post-marital affairs.

Chapters 3 and 4 of the book traverse the period of the American Revolution and independence from Britain. Given the events leading up to the break with Britain, Adams’s home state of Massachusetts was the center of the action, whereas Virginia residents were not as directly involved until after the imposition of the Coercive Acts following the Boston Tea Party in December 1773. Although both Adams and Jefferson were members of a committee appointed by the Second Continental Congress to compose a Declaration of Independence, Jefferson alone wrote the original draft. Subsequently, Wood notes that the authorship of the Declaration “had taken on immense emotional significance for both men; indeed it had become one of the most important issues dividing them” (p 121).

In the main portion of the book, including Chapters 5 through 10, Wood analyzes the various positions held by the principals from the early 1780s until their mutual retirement from public office. Adams and Jefferson served together in diplomatic posts in France, and their families became close during this period. Later, when Adams was appointed as minister to England, his wife continued correspondence with Jefferson. After they returned to America, Adams took a leading role in the formation and implementation of the Massachusetts constitution, whereas Jefferson was less than successful in seeking to revise Virginia’s 1776 constitution. The two Founding Fathers differed in their views about the Articles of Confederation and its successor, the Federal Constitution, particularly on the subject of the extent of executive power. As Adams

began service as George Washington's vice president in 1789, Jefferson experienced the French Revolution directly.

In 1792, Adams and Jefferson both competed for the vice presidency--the first of three consecutive elections between the two—with Adams winning easily. When Adams won the presidency in 1796, Jefferson came in second and therefore became vice president. However, Adams lost to Jefferson in the 1800 election for president. Throughout the 1790s, political parties developed around the personalities and policies of the two men, further straining their friendship. When Jefferson took power as America's third president, he quickly overturned many previous precedents set by George Washington and Adams. While Adams and Jefferson remained bitter rivals for the first decade of the nineteenth century, Abigail Adams continued to converse with Jefferson until an 1804, when a disagreement over judicial replacements involving John Quincy Adams boiled over. For the next seven years, the "friendship between the Adamses and Jefferson was as dead as ever" (p. 355).

Chapters 11 and 12 highlight the resurrection of the ties between John Adams and Thomas Jefferson. Wood credits Pennsylvania physician Benjamin Rush—a co-signer of the Declaration of Independence along with the latter men and long-time friend to both—with initiating a series of separate letters which eventually led to direct communication. From New Year's Day 1812 until their deaths hours apart, Adams and Jefferson wrote 158 letters to each other. While continuing to disagree on issues of the day, the two titans were now observers rather than participants.

The Epilogue, titled "The National Jubilee," details the final days of America's second and third president together with their perceived legacies. On Independence Day 1826, both men succumbed to medical conditions, with Jefferson passing five hours before Adams. According to Wood, the reason that Thomas Jefferson remains superior to John Adams in America's consciousness has to do with their respective views toward equality: "Adams was too questioning, too contrarian, too cynical, to offer any such support for America's nationhood," whereas Jefferson offered citizens "a set of beliefs that through the generations have supplied a bond that holds together the most diverse nation that history has ever known" (p. 433).

Other Reviews of Book

Shortly after the publication of *Friends Divided* in October 2017, several reviews of the book appeared in print. Glenn C. Altschuler (2017) notes that while both men contributed insights about the structure and operation of representative government, Jefferson's optimism cemented his legacy. Historian Richard Brookhiser (2017) opines that Jefferson, despite admitting that humans differed in their abilities, projected hope.

An overview of the book published in the *Christian Science Monitor* (2017) agreed with Wood's assessment of why Jefferson remains more popular than Adams: he told Americans what they wanted to hear rather than what they needed to know. Finally, Paul Carrier's (2018) review of *Friends Divided* contrasts Jefferson's egalitarianism and American exceptionalism with Adams's skepticism of self-government and acceptance of aristocracy.

Commentary

In their respective Pulitzer Prize-winning biographies of John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, David McCullough (2001) and Jon Meacham (2013) further add to theories as to why Jefferson is generally regarded as more consequential than Adams. For McCullough, it had to do with Jefferson writing his own epitaph, while Adams let history do so for him. Similarly, Meacham weighs the influence of Jefferson's belief in "the power of words in public life, in the molding of public opinion..." (p. 504).

There is certainly an alternative conception of the contributions of John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, one which relies on facts about their lives. Jefferson was a slaveholder throughout his adult life and, given the opportunity to free those in servitude at his death, he did so for only a handful. Clearly, Jefferson ended up on the wrong side of history on the slavery question. Too, Jefferson's persistent debts resulted in the humiliating sale of his estate after his passing, while Adams was much more responsible with his finances. That John's son, John Quincy, likewise became president meant that Adams tied Jefferson in overall service as chief executive with eight years each. Finally, Jack Rakove's 2010 book assessing the records and legacies of the Founding Fathers hints that Adams' commitment to public duty was stronger than Jefferson's.

Unfortunately for John Adams, the latter traits are minimized while the plethora of positive similarities between he and Thomas Jefferson is also neglected. Rather, theories of political cycles of presidential influence

(Hoff, 1990), the impact of political factors on presidential rankings (Hoff, 1985; Siena Research Institute, 2019), and frequency of written communication to Congress (Hoff, 2008) emerge as possible reasons for Jefferson's continuing advantage in the public mind.

Yet, because their friendship was renewed in earnest after its bitter breach, the complete history of John Adams and Thomas Jefferson must perpetually include their overlapping influence on each other and the country they helped to build.

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