Not One Man in America Believed Him

On the Historical Misunderstanding of John Adams, with an Apologia

Daniel Frontino Elash
ne thing becomes apparent in reading through the correspondence between John Adams and Thomas Jefferson. As the two reconciled years of personal acrimony with each other, after long lives spent together involved in revolutionary politics, they truly felt that few really understood them anymore. As Jefferson put it in a letter to Adams, "...why am I dosing you with these Antediluvian topics? Because I am glad to have some one to whom they are familiar, and who will not receive them as if I dropped from the moon." Adams felt much the same, in a way that both caused him personal anguish and doggedly obscured his legacy across the centuries since his desperate last minute efforts to come to a common understanding with Jefferson. Adams' problem, put as simply as possible, was that he had one foot firmly in the classical tradition of Greece and Rome, and the other in a future world of an enlightened population governing itself in democratic republics. He thus straddled worlds that did not always make immediate sense to each other. This was true in his time and has only become truer ever since, as classical education has retreated from the core of an eighteenth century schoolboy's education to a collegiate discipline involving years of exclusive study and, so often, accompanying years of student debt and monastic living. As a result,

---


2. Adams discussed how due to a lack of understanding of his politics, "...I and my Sons and all my Friends will be hated throughout New England..." in his letter to Jefferson of 3 May 1812, Cappon, *Letters* 303-4. He complained to Jefferson in his letter of 9 July 1813 that "I have been so unfortunate as never to be able to make myself understood" on the topic of natural aristocracy (Cappon, *Letters* 351-2), indeed the source of much of his bad political reputation, as will be discussed further on. Adams held forth at some length on the exact nature of how he was misunderstood so as to be construed a monarchist in his letter to Jefferson of 15 July, 1813 (Cappon, *Letters* 357-8).

historians have largely misunderstood John Adams' legacy as a staunch believer in republican government, because of the central role of the classics in his thinking and writing.

A rigorous if not necessarily exhaustive survey of works on Adams and his beliefs supports the assessment that scholars of American history have almost universally ignored classical influences on Adams' thought. Such ignorance, willful or unwitting, has contributed to the propagation of the myth that Adams was a monarchist in particular, and pro-aristocracy in an antidemocratic sense more generally. Some historians, while discussing Adams, his writings, and his legacy, never mention classical factors such as Rome or Greece, or writers such as Polybius or Livy, anywhere in their discussions. This has the effect of propagating

pedagogy after that generation, as Jefferson complains of to Adams in the passage cited in Footnote 1, in a letter dated 5 July 1814.


**Ex Post Facto**

**Daniel Frontino Elash**
misunderstandings of both Adams and of his positions. Others will mention such influences in passing, but not credit or situate them as central to Adams' thinking.¹

¹ For example, Correa Moylan Walsh, *The Political Science of John Adams: A Study in the Theory of Mixed Government and the Bicameral System* (New York and London: The Knickerbocker Press, 1915), holds that it took English political thinkers to perfect the flawed and incomplete ideas they inherited from the ancients (22-3, plus notes). While he does give the Roman republican system some credit where it is due (95), he disputes its overall soundness in quite polemic terms (38), holding it to be representative of "primitive" times (106 plus note), and he repeatedly asserts its defectiveness (182, 231). As for Adams' alleged monarchism, Walsh seems to uphold and perpetuate the myth, for examples on pages 276, 281-2, 284. Edward Handler, *America and Europe in the Political Thought of John Adams* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964) entirely misunderstands Adams (22-9), concluding that Adams was the "political theorist of an American "restoration"" (29). His utter incomprehension of the classical influences on the thinking he misunderstands is apparent in his characterization of Greece and Rome as "horrors" (45), in his dismissiveness (54, 58), and in his doubt as to the applicability of classical models at all (61-2). Merrill D. Peterson, *Adams and Jefferson: A Revolutionary Dialogue*, Mercer Univ. Lamar Memorial Lectures no. 19, (Athens GA: University of Georgia Press, 1976), while directly absorbing Adams of being a monarchist (56), still holds him to be pro-aristocratic (63), and while he drops Cicero's name (4, 95, 125) he never gives the classics credit for influencing Adams' thought, as evidenced by lack of mention in his discussions of *Discourses on Davila* (38-43, 51-2). Manning J. Dauer, *The Adams Federalists* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1953) offers an excellent treatment of Adams' opinions and writings (37-43, 44, 50, 51-52, 61, 83-4, 86), while almost perfectly divorcing them from their classical context (41). John A. Schutz and Douglass Adair, eds., *The Spur of Fame: Dialogues of John Adams and Benjamin Rush, 1805-1813* (San Marino: The Huntington Library, 1966), mention the classics in the context of the educational debate (8-9), without connecting them to Adams' writings (8, 174, 220) or opinions (174). Even an Adams rehabilitationist like Gilbert Chinard, *Honest John Adams* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1933), who would be well served by an examination of the classics in Adams' thinking, only barely mentions them in discussion of his writings (ix-xi, 90, 203-14), and does so in such a bare and peripheral way as to reveal his own lack of understanding. Robert A. East, *John Adams* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1979) shows his disdain for Adams (66-7, 71) and the classics in equal measure, in a way that both perpetuates the monarchist smears against Adams while obscuring the classical influences on the writings upon which those charges were based, in the very same breath (71). David McCullough, *John Adams* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001) understands that Adams was no monarchist (375), but even his discussions of Adams views (409-410, 421) barely mention Cicero (375) and never Polybius. His recognition of classical influence on Adams is made most explicit where he says that "(o) Adams nothing had changed about human nature since the time of the ancients" (377). However, he does not extend that understanding to his discussion of Adams' views on "natural aristocracy" (421). Joseph J. Ellis, *Passionate Sage: The Character and Legacy of John Adams* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1993) discusses *Defence and Davila* at length without ever mentioning their classical content (145-53, 165-73), and while the book offers a picture of a bust of Adams as an "American Cicero" (178), it never seriously discusses classical sources or thinkers as influences in Adams' work. Ellis misses important classical elements underlying apparently topical issues; for example, in *Founding Brothers: The Revolutionary Generation* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001) he sees the few-versus-many debate between Adams and Jefferson in polemic terms, when in fact it is the republican people-senate debate stretching back to antiquity (230-3). Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: The Viking Press, 1963), barely offers a Roman allusion in a four-page discussion of the revolutionary thought of John Adams (114-7). Cappon makes one bare passing
This has the effect of perpetuating misunderstandings of Adams' points of view, by ostensibly explaining him without providing the classical context that is critical to understand his thinking. Very few historians actually give full faith and credit, as it were, to the large role that Greek and Roman writers of classical history played in informing Adams' and others' thoughts on society, governance and politics.\textsuperscript{6} Such writers affirm that Adams is indeed properly understandable, where one chooses to delve into the classical components of his thought, a vital perspective without which Adams can truly seem as bad as his reputation alleges.

Why have so many historians missed the mark entirely on the classical origins of the controversial material in Adams' writings? The liberal use of the Latin language throughout important primary sources can present significant hurdles—even if much of it is simply quotation of classical scholars such as Cicero and Tacitus, readily available in conveniently-ubiquitous, English-language Penguin Classic editions.\textsuperscript{7} At the same time, classicists can just as easily fail to see the very American purposes that the use of the classics served for its founders. Perhaps they look at these texts as sources of republican ideas, or at least of a learned gravitas, but at any rate as derivative expressions of earlier ideas that are purer the further back one goes.\textsuperscript{8} This is in stark contradiction to the founders' use of the classics as

reference to "classics" in 18 pages of introduction to over 600 pages rich in Latin and Greek language and reference (Cappon, Letters xxxi-xlxx).

\textsuperscript{6} J.G.A. Pocock, \textit{The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition} (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975) properly contextualizes Adams' thinking on separation of powers in its classical context (128), and likewise his political thinking in general (317) and on natural aristocracy (395). He properly characterizes \textit{Defence} as misunderstood to advocate aristocracy (526). He discusses the abandonment of virtue as a republican foundation (526-7), fears that the Order of the Cincinnati would become a hereditary aristocracy (527-8), and the Roman content of American political discourse (529). Not least, he properly characterizes Adams' classical republicanism in a Roman context (531). Likewise Bernard Bailyn, \textit{The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution} (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967) gives due credit to classical influences on the thinking of the founders generally (23-6), including on that of Thomas Jefferson (24-5) and John Adams in particular (26), though he does quote Johnson in agreement with his allegation that much of it generally is merely "window dressing" (24). He goes on to hold that the classics are more influential than determinative in such thinking, and credits Enlightenment rationalism with a more direct sort of influence (26). To contest that in its fullness is beyond the scope of this paper—though the assertion of a barrier between classical and Enlightenment thought is quite contestable indeed. Suffice it here to say that the evidence in Adams' own writings shows that the classics are central to his thinking, whatever descriptor one cares to assign to their function in that thought, as this paper will proceed to illustrate.

\textsuperscript{7} For example, see John Adams, \textit{Defense of the Constitutions of Government of the United States of America, Volume I} (Aalen: Scientia Verlag, 1979), wherein he supplies lengthy quotes in Latin without translation (226-30, 242). Adams does it again in his \textit{Discourses on Davila}, for example see \textit{The Works of John Adams, Second President of the United States, Vol. 6} (Boston: Charles C. Little and James Brown, 1851), 248, 263-4. For an example from the Jefferson-Adams correspondence, see the letters of 27 June – 12 October 1813, in which they each push the other to achievement in Greek and Latin (Cappon, Letters, 335-86).

\textsuperscript{8} M.N.S. Sellers discusses the situation in the introduction to his book, \textit{American Republicanism: Roman Ideology in the United States Constitution} (New York: New York University Press, 1994), in which he states that as a classics undergraduate who earned a Doctorate in History and went on to work in a faculty of law, he set out to write a book that bridges the limits of perception in each respective field, as it relates to the others (see page x of the introduction).

\textbf{DANIEL FRONTINO ELASH}
critical but imperfect tools that had to be adapted to the purposes of the American Revolution. Without a wider understanding in each other’s fields, it is possible and perhaps even likely that both sets of scholars have missed the central importance of the classics to John Adams’ revolutionary thinking, and moreover, the significance of that thinking to the American republican experiment.

A fuller consideration of Adams’ writings illustrates the gap between his own understanding of his ideas and others’ understandings of those same ideas. For example, counting and sorting every classical reference in the Adams-Jefferson correspondence clearly reveals both the large amount and the intellectual importance of the classical material therein. There are literally dozens of such references in their correspondence, particularly after 1812 when each was formally retired from public life and after years of bitter silence between the two. A closer look reveals that while a majority of these references were allusions, brief references, name-dropping, and other such comments made in passing or aside from the point being made, many of them were also germane to the topic at hand, if not the topic itself. There are at least eighty-two classical allusions and references in the letters. Both men possessed an obviously high level of classical education, an education that they felt was becoming a thing of the past—an observation with which at least some modern scholars agree. These classical references also sometimes indicate a particular topic of shared interest or passion, and revealing these topics is a major reward for the labor of counting and sorting them. Classical references are strewn throughout the letters, and it may be that counting these and noting the clusters will likewise reveal the most fruitful areas for more in-depth work.

Aside from education, two topics emerge as subjects of sustained interest in the classical components of the Adams-Jefferson correspondence: the origins and development of monotheism, and the origins and development of aristocracy. There are nineteen points in the correspondence at which Adams or Jefferson draw on or make classical references in the course of discussing the topic of monotheism. Adams and Jefferson explored the origins of monotheism, both within and outside of the Christian tradition. If they did not specifically foresee a transition from a religiously-based to a “post-God” public sphere, they at least forecast the spreading of Enlightenment ideals and the decline of religious mysticism as going hand in hand. Both agreed that this was a most desirable goal, and even necessary for the

---

9 Adams was acutely aware that past republican failures left the American project open to criticism. He countered that learning the lessons of the past and adapting provisions accordingly was the answer (*Davila*, 397-9). In fact, his whole *Defence* is aimed at the question (see Preface, i-xxi). In late 1819, Jefferson and Adams agreed that there was little of actual virtue in the Roman system, as evidenced by its decline into despotism (*Cappon, Letters* 549-51). They were also concerned about NaPoLeón as illustrative of republican failure (*Cappon, Letters* 434-4, 596-7).


Not One Man in America Believed Him
long term success of democracy. There are also an additional fourteen points in the correspondence at which Adams or Jefferson drew on or made classical references in the course of discussing the topic of aristocracy. This conversational thread offers insight into Adams’ personal theories on the existence of a natural aristocracy (i.e. of influence if not merit as opposed to hereditary), and its use as a component in the basis for republican government.

Both the aristocracy and the monotheism threads are visibly clustered at specific nodes in the correspondence, whereas the allusions are spread throughout. It is worth noting that not all allusions are quotes of other people—both Adams and Jefferson have their own things to say, particularly in Latin but also in ancient Greek. All three of these topics directly relate to Adams’ and Jefferson’s educations and to their shared concerns about the establishment and governance of a viable republic (or set of republics) in America. Due to space and time constraints, this paper will look most closely at the aristocracy thread, though all three are in fact wound up together. Thus, while some of the classical materials in the sources fall beyond the scope of this paper, their interwoven nature brings up deeper questions that deserve a fuller consideration, and doing justice to even this limited topic requires acknowledgement of that.

The immediate reason Adams discussed aristocracy with Jefferson was because of the old idea that John Adams was secretly a monarchist. Jefferson had played a major role in that misperception, and so it was one of the things they aimed to reconcile in their correspondence. It mattered very much that the issue was seriously framed and used as a cudgel against Adams’ character in the partisan context of the nasty presidential campaign Jefferson ran and won against Adams in 1799. These attacks had drawn on Adams’ writings, particularly Discourses on Davila and also Defence of the Constitutions. Adams seethed for years in the bitterness of the betrayal, not only of himself by an old friend, but also of the sacred mission of the American Revolution for which both had fought so long and hard.

In other words, the slanderous charges that Adams secretly wanted to impose a monarchy and an aristocracy on America, that he would crown himself and attempt to pass it on to his son John Quincy Adams, and that his writings were the proof, were not just an assault on him personally, but on the ideals he understood the founders to more or less collectively hold in common. After all, the Defence was meant specifically to articulate the ideals upon which the American republic had been based at least since the Federal Constitution had replaced the dysfunctional Articles of Confederation in 1787.

12 A particularly scathing indictment of organized religion’s historical obstruction of the process by Adams may be found in Cappon, Letters, 351. An example of Jefferson’s radical revisionism of Christianity may be found on pages 383-6. However, he cannot do it without quoting Greek (386). In fact, he sees science as the salvation of humanity (391). Adams’ view on rational religion is well-articulated on pages 445-6.
14 Ellis, Brothers, 167-70.
15 Ellis, Brothers, 209.

Daniel Frontino Elash
Ex Post Facto

Adams mentioned Herodotus, Cicero and Tacitus in his Preface to the Defence of the US Constitutions as ancient authorities on mixed-government democracies. However, it is no secret that his ideas came right out of book six of Polybius’ writings. Two sections found in Volume 1 of Defence made this clear, complete with Adams’ own source citations. Where Tacitus offered descriptions of various ancient systems as they existed, Polybius offered a holistic theory of how a cohesive government of component parts may be set up—much more useful to the tasks at hand of America’s founders. Polybius was a Greek political hostage and observer at Rome for some twenty years at the height of the Roman Republic. He set out to describe the Roman political system to which he was a witness. In his writings, Polybius theorized three political cycles—that of a monarchy, an aristocracy, and a democracy. He believed that each grew out of the decline of the previous one from its virtuous to its degenerate form. More specifically, he claimed that a monarchy would corrupt into tyranny, and at length be replaced by an aristocracy. The aristocracy would in time decline into an oligarchy, until it was no longer sufferable and was replaced by a democracy. Democracy in its turn would give way to mob rule, and the cycle would be completed in a curative return to monarchy. Polybius personally attributed the original implementation of the idea of a mixed government, in which each of these three elements coexist in the same government and balance power between them by providing checks on the abuse of power by each, to the Spartan ruler Lycurgus.

Polybius maintained that the Romans drew the same conclusions from their own mistakes, something America’s founders were happily spared for being able to draw on these ancient lessons as a gift of their classical educations. He went on to describe the Roman system as a “mixed constitution” government, in which two consuls played the monarchial role, while the Senate took on the role of an aristocracy, and the people held their own supreme powers. Polybius then discussed interactions between component bodies of the Roman system, specifically praising the strength of the whole system. It is very important to note here that these elements only played the roles of the respective social orders in a governmental system; they were not the orders themselves in society. The two consuls acted in the role of kings although they were not entitled to absolute monarchical power, and likewise with the senate in the role of an “aristocracy.” Adams surely thought he could not be clearer that the Senate playing the role of an aristocracy in a mixed-government system was not the same thing as a European-

---

16 Adams, Defence, Herodotus on p. ii, Cicero and Tacitus on xix.
17 Adams, Defence, Letters XXX and XXXI, see in particular page 169.
18 As discussed by Adams, Defence, Letter XXXVII
20 Polybius, Rise, 6:10. Adams takes up the case of Lycurgus and Sparta (Lacedaemon) in Defense, Letter XL.
21 Polybius, Rise, 6:10.
22 Polybius, Rise, 6:11-4.
23 Polybius, Rise, 6:16-7.

Not One Man in America Believed Him
style, hereditary (and thus not natural, and thus corrupt) aristocracy. After all, he pointed right at the relevant passages in Polybius that made this clear.24

*Defense* drew on such ancient and universally respected sources as Polybius, as well as those of other, more recent republics and theoreticians, to drive home the point that the US Constitution, far from being a “wild eyed experiment” in fact was “state of the art” political science backed up by millennia of thought and practice. Adams opened *Defense* with a historical summary, not only speaking for a mixed government but also veritably warning of the consequences of a failure to provide for one properly. “Without three orders, and an effectual balance between them, in every American constitution, it must be destined to frequent unavoidable revolutions…” noted Adams at the start of his work.25 This statement hardly seems to be that of a monarchist. In addition, Adams noted, “it would be better for America… [to] go through all the revolutions of the Grecian states, rather than establish an absolute monarchy among them…”26 Furthermore, he continued:

> It is become a kind of fashion among writers, to admit, as a maxim, that if you could always be sure of a wise, active, and virtuous prince, monarchy would be the best of governments. But this is so far from being admissible, that it will forever remain true, that a free government has a great advantage over a simple monarchy.27

The rest of the paragraph sang the praises of a mixed government, comprised of three distinct branches—an oft-reiterated theme in Adams’ writings, and most obviously not the stuff of crypto-monarchism.

The first volume of Adams’ *Defense* was rushed off of the presses and into the hands of delegates arriving for the Convention that was to eventually recommend adoption of the Constitution.28 The Romans were widely considered, of every historical and contemporary republic studied by the founders (and Adams looked at them all), to have been the ones to most effectively solve the very problem facing American constitutional framers—how to assure that a republic once established did not degenerate into the perpetual bloodshed and revolving dictatorships of political instability.29 As Adams put it, “The institutions now made in America will never

---

24 He also makes it clear in his later correspondence with Jefferson (but not without reaching for Latin and Greek in illustration of his points). For examples, see Cappon, *Letters*, 352, 355, 365-6, and 370-2.
27 Adams, *Defence*, viii.
28 Sellers, *Republicanism*, 33 and 38. It is notable, however, that today we think of the tripartite division of powers of government in the executive, legislative and judicial, when in the mind of John Adams it was clearly in the executive and each chamber of Congress, the Senate playing the aristocratic role and the House that of the people, as discussed above. Ironically, it is the judiciary that is the most monarchial in the nature and use of its powers in the American constitutional system.
29 As the Tables of Contents of all three volumes of the *Defence* makes clear, Adams considered everything from the evolution of English division of powers in Letter XX, to the little Republic of San Marino in Italy in Letter III, and all time periods from the ancient Greeks such as in Letters XXX-XXXIII to political theorists who were his contemporaries, such as Locke in Letter LIV and Montesquieu in Letter XXVIII. A warning of the dire, bloody consequences of the degeneration of the

DANIEL FRONTINO ELASH
wholly wear out for thousands of years: it is of the last importance then that they should begin right; if they set out wrong, they will never be able to return, unless it be by accident, to the right path." It is perhaps telling that the precedent he gives for these remarkable assertions is the destruction of the western Roman Empire by German tribes, and the subsequent endurance of the idea of mixed government in Europe, degenerate as it was under feudalism.

For their part, delegates to the Convention felt unmitigated gratitude to the otherwise-absent Adams, who was nevertheless omnipresent in the form of his *Defense*. As Benjamin Rush wrote to Richard Price from Philadelphia on 2 June, 1787:

Mr. Adams's book has diffused such excellent principals among us, that there is little doubt of our adopting a vigorous and compounded federal legislature. Our illustrious minister in this gift to his country has done us more service than if he had obtained alliances for us with all the nations of Europe.

Meanwhile, the unresolved and yet unutterable polemic of slavery as a doubtful basis for a free republic was in the back of everyone's minds. Slavery gave a stark and foreboding sense of perilous duty to what were, perhaps, otherwise-sanguine debates over whether one or two legislative chambers were preferable. At least some of that foreboding was to come true by the 1860s, though reading the Adams-Jefferson correspondence, one might wonder that it was put off for so long. As Jefferson wondered to Adams in his letter of 22 January 1821:

Are our slaves to be presented with freedom and a dagger? ...Are we then to see again Athenian and Lacedaemonian confederacies? To wage another Peloponnesian war to settle the ascendancy between them? Or is this the tocsin of a merely servile war? That remains to be seen: but not I hope by you or me.

Adams replied on 3 February of that year:

Slavery in this Country I have seen hanging over it like a black cloud for half a Century. ...I might probably say I had seen Armies of Negroes

---

*Not One Man in America Believed Him*
Ex Post Facto

marching and countermarching in the air, shining in Armour. I have been so terrified with this Phenomenon that I constantly said in former times to the Southern Gentlemen, I cannot comprehend this object; I must leave it to you.35

As we all know, it turned out that the republic did survive the crisis when it came. Nevertheless, the stability of the republic is something Americans have never ceased worrying about and guarding, each party in its own ways, to this day.36

At any rate, on the cusp of dangerous times, delegates to the Constitutional assembly readily embraced Adams' contribution. It is not difficult to imagine them skimming the book-length work among the many other materials at hand for them to consider, spending more time with the introduction and conclusion and glancing through the intervening chapters on the likes of Polybius and the Roman Republic and Greek city-states with a knowing nod—after all, anyone who had been to grade school had studied some Latin. Sellers makes the interesting point that Adams (and many other writers of the time) did not even feel it necessary to offer translations of their Latin quotations—one could look them up if not just read them, or translate them for oneself.37 Such a rhetorical underpinning must have also provided a gravitas that delegates would find both useful and comforting as they went home and faced sharp questions from skeptical constituents apprehensive of a new, central government with too much power, too remote from their daily lives. Defence played an important role in getting the Constitution adopted.

Everyone loved the Defence—at least everyone who embraced the Constitution, including Jefferson. Jefferson wrote to Adams from Paris on 6 Feb. 1787, stating "I thank you much for the valuable present of your book [the Defence]. The subject of it is interesting and I am sure it is well treated. I shall take it on my journey that I may have time to study it."38 Lest that seem mere politeness, he replied again, having read the book by 23 February of the same year, "I have read your book with infinite satisfaction and improvement. It will do great good in America. It's [sic] learning and it's [sic] good sense will I hope make it an institute for our politicians, old as well as young." The only reconsideration he asked of Adams regards whether Congress be a legislative or diplomatic assembly. He added that he had personally taken steps to assure a good-quality translation into French.39 These are hardly the words and acts of a dissenter.

35 Cappon, Letters, 571.
36 A fine example may be found in the 2000 presidential election, unprecedented and effectively decided by a Supreme Court ruling, amid much talk of a constitutional crisis if the Florida ballot situation were not somehow resolved and no clear winner emerged. For a summary, see Christine Barbour and Gerald C. Wright, "What's at Stake in the Contested Presidential Election of 2000?" Houghton Mifflin Textbook Site for "Keeping the Republic," n.d. [website]; available from <http://college.hmco.com/polisci/barbour_wright/keep_repub/Ie/students/election/electionupdatef.htm>; Internet; accessed 23 April 2005>.
37 Sellers, Republicanism, 21.
38 Cappon, Letters, 170.
39 Cappon, Letters, 174-5.

DANIEL FRONTINO ELASH
So, what exactly happened to the reputation that won Adams election as America’s first Vice President and second President? In short, the French Revolution happened. American revolutionaries were delighted—it seemed that the universal promise of America’s own revolution would indeed spread across the Earth, and that a new Age of Reason would dawn on a humanity freed from monarchial-aristocratic chains. It was not that Adams did not harbor these same hopes. As early as 1787 he had written to Jefferson that “All Europe resounds with Projects for reviving, States and Assemblies, I think: and France is taking the lead.—How such assemblies will mix, with Simple Monarchies, is the question.” A propensity to mix them by bloodshed left Adams with grave doubts. In his 1812 note prepended to the *Discourses on Davila*, written to express those doubts, Adams wondered in writing that he himself:

...had the courage to oppose and publish his own opinions to the universal opinion of America, and, indeed, of all mankind. Not one man in America believed him. He knew not one and has not heard of one since who then believed him. The work, however, powerfully operated to destroy his popularity. It was urged as full proof, that he was an advocate for monarchy, and laboring to introduce a hereditary president in America.41

Davila was an Italian writer on French history.42 Tracing the emergence and development of the French throne from its Frankish origins, Adams drew heavily on Davila’s work in his own, to illustrate the bloodshed by which the French monarchy had gained and maintained something like a political hegemony only relatively recently in France. Indeed it is a dull, heavy volume, brimming with obscure characters unleashing bloodbaths on the French population the moment they saw the slightest chance of advantage over rivals to the French throne. Adams wondered what would become of France with the removal of any semblance of mixed government in favor of rule of the people alone. What was to become of any people whose government suffered the crushing of two of the three orders by violent bloodshed? The long and gory list of battles was his barely-implicit answer, and in case that dire warning escaped the gentle reader Adams concluded that:

It has been said, that it is extremely difficult to preserve a balance. This is no more than to say that it is extremely difficult to preserve liberty. To this truth all ages and nations attest. It is so difficult, that the very appearance of it is lost over the whole earth, excepting one island and North America. How long it will be before she returns to her native skies, and leaves the whole human race in slavery, will depend on the intelligence and virtue of the people. A balance, with all its difficulty, must be preserved, or liberty is lost forever. Perhaps a perfect balance, if

41 Adams, *Davila*, 227. He refers to himself in the third person.
it ever existed, has not been maintained in its perfection; yet such a
balance as has been sufficient to liberty, has been supported in some
nations for many centuries together; and we must come as near as we can
to a perfect equilibrium, or all is lost. When it is once widely departed
from, the departure increases rapidly, till the whole is lost. If the people
have not understanding and virtue enough, and will not be persuaded to
the necessity of supporting an independent executive authority, an
independent senate, and an independent judiciary power, as well as an
independent house of representatives, all pretensions to a balance are lost,
and with them all hopes of security to our dearest interests, all hopes of
liberty.43

What strikes one is how much like the Defence this reads, in both its general
concerns and in its particular prescriptions. However, in the context of a critique of
a then still fresh democratic revolution, it could be read easily enough as bemoaning
the loss of a monarchial-aristocratic system to the rise of a democracy. Was Britain
free under a king, while France was oppressed under popular rule? None would buy
it, not in America anyway.

Adams extensively illustrated his points in several places, drawing examples
from classical antiquity to do so. His first such use was an extensive description of
the Roman political system.44 In the context of government playing a rightful role in
the regulation of human competition for glory, prestige, and social recognition,
Adams queried the reader as to whether “there has ever been a nation who
understood the human heart better than the Romans, or made a better use of the
passion for consideration, congratulation, and distinction?”45 He then went on to
describe the distinctions—one might call them social classes or ranks—in Roman
society. Adams spoke of distinctions of dress, such as wearing the color purple and
gold rings; of symbols of power such as chairs, crowns, and rods; and of rituals such
as triumphs and ovations. That he went on to contextualize such displays as “in the
ture spirit of republics” is a point easily enough lost if one is dwelling on the
distinctly imperial/monarchial implications of such things as special chairs and
crowns for heads of state.46 Even the example that follows, of a republican Rome
parading the defeated King Perseus, could be read with suspicion as sympathy, if
not apology, for monarchy.47 Adams’ use of Caesar as an example of ambition’s
insatiability in addition to his mention of Plato in relation to kingship and his return
to the exemplary disgrace of the Macedonian royal house by Paulus Aemilius—
emphasizing the attachment of his followers to the king—looked suspicious to one
who believed that Adams was attacking a revolutionary people in defense of a
monarchial-aristocratic system.48 For his part, Adams felt himself to be clear enough
on what he did want:

---

43 Adams, Davila, 399.
44 Adams, Davila, 243-4.
45 Adams, Davila, 243.
46 Adams, Davila, 243.
47 Adams, Davila, 244.
48 Adams, Davila, 249, 255, 261. He also mentioned Caesar on pages 263 and 275.

DANIEL FRONTINO ELASH
Let the rich and the poor unite in the bands of mutual affection, be mutually sensible of each other’s ignorance, weakness, and error, and unite in concerting measures for their mutual defence against each other’s vices and follies, by supporting an impartial mediator. 49

On the other hand, would that “impartial mediator” happen to be a king? Furthermore, Adams fed the flames of his own fire by doing things like suggesting that the president be addressed as “His Highness” or “His Majesty” and by arguing that the existence of an aristocracy was both natural and inevitable. 50 Of course, he meant something different than the characterizations by his opponents of those positions, as he later made explicit to Jefferson in their correspondence. What he really meant was that some people were, for whatever reason, more influential than others—whether by birth or by beauty, wealth, intelligence or virtue—and that influence is also known as aristocracy. 51 Such influence was natural and thus should be accounted for, even harnessed for the sake of the public good. 52 Far from contradictory, this was entirely consistent with a republican world view. Polybius noted that in the Roman electoral system, it was “the people who bestow offices on those who deserve them, and these are the noblest rewards of virtue the state can provide.” 53 It was not uncommon for Adams to express his agreement with that in aristocratic terms, for example where he stated in the conclusion to Defence that “Congress will always be composed of members from the natural and artificial aristocratic body in every state...” 54 Why did he need to make the distinction if he intended an “artificial” hereditary aristocracy to be instituted, as opposed to a “natural” one that recommended itself for public service by its public virtues, its persuasion by whatever means, as expressed in and validated by elections? Aristocracy, to Adams, was a natural organizing element and social glue to a functioning democracy, nothing more or nothing less. To his mind, an imposed aristocracy was a perversion of a natural human tendency. Government was the proper check to this natural drive. 55

Public virtue, while ultimately replaced in the American ideological structure of governance with the concept of a balance of competing interest, was generally held by the founders as an ideal to be cultivated for the sake of the safety and health of the republic. 56 It was concern for this loss of virtue, as well as loss of balance in

49 Adams, Davila, 396.
50 Ellis, Brothers, 168. Adams, Davila, 245-8.
51 Adams, Letters, 371-2, for example. Of course by then it was years later and he was explaining himself to Jefferson. Note he also reached for Greek and Latin precedents with which to frame his comments—and in the original languages.
52 Cappon, Letters, 365-366. Again, in direct response to Greek and Latin sources.
53 Polybius, Rise, 6:14.
54 Adams, Defence, 363.
55 Adams, Davila, 262-3.
56 For examples, all in John P. Kaminski and Richard Leffler, eds. Federalists and Antifederalists: The Debate Over the Ratification of the Constitution (Madison: Madison House, 1989): of founders relying on public virtue, see the end of Madison’s letter, page 62; for elections as public expression of virtue, see Coxe’s letter, pages 76-7. The anti-federalists tended to see virtue as insufficient public
The government, that gave Adams cause for such grave concern in the French Revolution. If he expressed these concerns better with the benefit of hindsight, he had every right to believe himself understood in *Davila* because of the warm reception the same ideas had received in *Defence*. However, in the case of *Davila*, Adams’ efforts to convey his fears about the French Revolution were, in turn, causing some concerns about his own leanings, and all the Roman republican rhetoric he could muster was not assuaging them. Written in 1790, *Davila* predates significant events in the French Revolution, events from which Adams would take a great deal of justification if not solace later. Meanwhile, *Davila* in and of itself was not enough to prevent his election as successor to George Washington in 1796.

Neither its gentlemanly concern for proper governance, nor democratic umbrage with some of its tone or appearance, were the end of *Davila*’s continued political relevance. In 1799, Jefferson’s political party found it quite useful to characterize, or perhaps to recharacterize, those writings in its quest to capture the White House from Adams and the Federalists. The fact that Jefferson campaigned at all was something of a scandal, at least in Adams’ view. Actually competing for office was an innovation and spoke of an unseemly eagerness to achieve that office. Elective office in a republic was instead supposed to be more of a duty, something one sought deferentially. In its pursuit, a virtuous candidate was expected to remain somewhat aloof. Furthermore, running for office as part of a party (or “faction”) was also innovative in a way that seemed to Adams corrosive to the best interests of the republic. In other words, his old friend seemed to him to be putting personal interests ahead of those of the republic, which was at least unvirtuous if not outright hypocritical behavior on the part of a founder. What damage might it cause the tender membranes of a brand new system of government?

*Davila* offered Jefferson’s partisans almost ready-made political hay, and they made much of it. They construed Adams’ previously well-understood sentiments in favor of a mixed system of government in which social elements were balanced against each other in a separation of powers, as expressing a secret agenda to impose a king and nobility on an unwitting and unwaried America. This “spin” was vastly aided by Adams’ own refusal to adapt his tactics to those of a political party willing to manipulate public opinion for advantage at the polls. Instead, he remained

---

57 An excellent example may be found in Cappon, *Letters*, 457, in which Adams describes being blamed for his early prediction that France would become a bloodbath. Jefferson concedes that Adams had been right and he wrong in his reply, pages 458-461.


59 Ellis, *Brothers*, 210. Jefferson saw it as perhaps inevitable and probably eternal, especially as it always fell along the same lines; see Cappon, *Letters*, 337-8. Adams replied that that was exactly the problem (351).

60 Ellis, *Brothers*, 211.

**Daniel Frontino Elash**
Ex Post Facto

virtuously above the fray of actually campaigning for the office for which he was standing.61

Adams lost the election to his now-former friend Jefferson, and the festering wounds took a long time to heal. The center of gravity in the stillborn attempt of Adams and Jefferson to re-establish correspondence in 1804 was a withering letter by Abigail Adams, detailing for Jefferson not only his political sins but the enduring sense of personal betrayal with which he had left the Adamses.62 Not least of these, Adams had written his Discourses on Davila in part on Jefferson's urging,63 to try to express his republican concerns, but later it was used as propaganda to prove that he was somehow a monarchist by an old friend who in fact knew better. Adams was left to retire, his reputation in tatters, alone and raging, not only at the personal betrayal of dear old friends and comrades—but also at the collective betrayal of the very ideals in which the republic had been ostensibly vouchsafed, and all for a mess of electoral pottage.

The correspondence in which the two men later repaired that old friendship, in the dusk of their lives, was famous even in its own day.64 However, despite attempts to get the men to publish these letters, each wanted the letters to remain intensely personal.65 There were old demons to exorcise, and the betrayals of private letters published (whether by each other or others) figured in them.66 Rather, as two of the last of their generation,67 it became increasingly important to make peace and achieve understanding, both for personal reasons and for the sake of intellectual companionship. As Adams famously put it to Jefferson, "You and I ought not to die, before we have explained ourselves to each other."68 Tellingly, it was after this breakthrough moment that the intellectual exchange took on the depth and breadth for which it is so remarkable, and this activity must have been a significant reward in itself. Posterity, while it may have been interested and while the two men must have known this, was an interferent in their relationship. They sought to minimize

61 Ellis, Brothers, 210.
62 Cappon, Letters, 271-4. That exchange was the only one in an 11-year gap in correspondence between Jefferson and the Adamses; see Cappon, Letters, xv-xvi, i.e. the Table of Contents, bearing in mind that the book is the complete correspondence.
63 Cappon, Letters, 351.
64 Jefferson noted that he had been approached about publishing their correspondence, and speculated that postal carriers had made their correspondence known, Cappon, Letters, 453. He was appalled.
65 Both Jefferson and Adams were deeply satisfied at having avoided such calamities as published letters (579-80).
66 I generally disagree with Ellis' analysis in Brothers that each had the major goal of writing, as if past one another, to posterity, such as he discusses on pages 223 and 227. On the other hand, Adams did seem to be addressing non-present readers of their correspondence in Cappon, Letters, 346. Yet he immediately proceeded to despair of making himself understood to Posterity, and doubted that the effort to collect the documentation to do so was even worth it. Jefferson saw it as perhaps inevitable in Cappon, Letters, 349. That it was there for the two men to come to grips with did not therefore necessitate same as one of their main goals.
67 See for example Cappon, Letters, 326, in which Adams warned Jefferson that a Mr. Lindsey had published some private letters sent him by Jefferson. Jefferson replied with concern (331) and Adams reassured him in his response (333).
68 Cappon, Letters, 326. Adams mourned in 1813 the passing of Benjamin Rush (328). The situation was dire by the fall of 1821 (574).

Not One Man in America Believed Him
such static in their reclaimed relationship, as evidenced by their repeated assurances of discretion.\(^69\) In fact, as shown above, the public stage had been a major component of the damage Adams’ and Jefferson’s relationship suffered, and one they were glad enough to be rid of, as retired gentlemen-farmers. They set about explaining themselves to each other, on every topic that had ever interested either. They did so with copious doses of Latin and Greek, and drew on sources in those languages to make their points. To reduce that to an intended, eventual public display misses the point, in a way not unlike considering all the Latin merely for show of erudition.

The issue of a natural aristocracy, and the damage done to Adams in the general misunderstanding of his position on the topic, is the beating heart of the section of this correspondence described in the beginning of this paper as the “aristocratic thread” or cluster of classical referents found in this body of documents. According to Adams himself:

...my “defence of the Constitutions” and “Discourses on Davila”, laid the foundation of that immense Unpopula[ri]ty, which fell like the tower of Siloam upon me. Your steady defense of democratical Principles, and your invariable favorable Opinion of the French Revolution laid the foundation of your Unbounded Popularity... Now, I will forfeit my Life, if you can find one Sentence in my Defence of the Constitutions, or the Discourses on Davila, which by a fair construction, can favor the introduction of a hereditary Monarchy or Aristocracy into America. They were all written to support and strengthen the Constitutions of the United States.\(^70\)

Truth be told, Jefferson in the end could not but agree “…that there is a natural aristocracy among men. The grounds of this are virtue and talents.”\(^71\) In fact, the world and events intervened to twist his meaning, and the nature of that intervention was a direct result of the effects the founders themselves had had on the world.\(^72\) With the benefit of hindsight, the irony was not lost on Adams and Jefferson.

Jefferson’s admission that he had been wrong about the French Revolution, and that Adams had been correct, gave Adams immense satisfaction. The destruction of the French aristocracy had in fact led first to a bloodbath, and then to a dictatorship, as Adams had predicted. Jefferson’s concession to this truth went a long way towards giving Adams a sense of vindication, and also towards reestablishing a trust that had been so damaged in those election-driven betrayals of common understandings of shared ideals.\(^73\) It also made discussions of subsequent events like the deposition and exile of Napoleon or the restoration of the French

\(^69\) Adams expressed both desire for discretion and lack of concern for reputation and posterity in Cappon, Letters, 333.
\(^70\) Cappon, Letters, 356. In fact, the whole letter addressed the situation (354-6) as well as his next one (357–8).
\(^71\) Cappon, Letters, 388.
\(^72\) Cappon, Letters, 575.
\(^73\) Ellis, Brothers, 237–9.
monarchy an extremely gratifying topic of conversation for both men.\textsuperscript{74} If one had been wrong about France, both had done a great deal better by their own country. Fears of a civil war over slavery notwithstanding, neither lived to see the American republic fall into the bloodbath-and-dictatorship cycle. They had every right to feel good about that, given European events.\textsuperscript{75}

Another and perhaps ultimate proof that their late correspondence was not merely a side function of concern for their legacy in the eyes of posterity, is the persistence of the idea that John Adams was indeed to any degree a sympathizer with or supporter of an aristocratic or monarchial governmental system, and not the ardent republican to which his whole life gave its testimony. Rather, his “credibility gap” widened over the intervening decades, perhaps incidentally as the classics were relegated to increasingly rarified or increasingly superficial levels of the educational system.\textsuperscript{76} After all, when Adams wrote the \textit{Defense}, he presumed that his readers could read Latin from their grade school educations, which implied by extension some familiarity with the contents of Polybius’ writings. However, if one does not even know Polybius’ name, what is one to make of Adams’ views on the necessity of tripartite balances of power in a “mixed” government?

This fundamental misunderstanding of John Adams has cost America much of its “Adamsian” legacy, as well as obscured the major role the classics played in the revolutionary thought of John Adams. That is both unfortunate and rectifiable, as the American republic continues to navigate the stormy political seas of war and constitutional crisis, partisan polemics and long term instability. Adams and Jefferson, in their peace, found room for optimism, even with the cautions appropriate to the dawning of the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{77} We might likewise profit from a reconsideration of their legacy in the fullness of its rich classical content.

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{74} For example, Cappon, \textit{Letters}, JA at 435-8, 455-6, 517-8, and TJ at 441-2.
\item \textsuperscript{75} Jefferson expresses that satisfaction in Cappon, \textit{Letters}, 391-2.
\item \textsuperscript{76} Jefferson himself bemoans the situation as early as 1814 in Cappon, \textit{Letters}, 434.
\item \textsuperscript{77} Adams in Cappon, \textit{Letters}, 456, and Jefferson at 458.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}