

# "Plato and the American President: Thirty-five as the Age of Eligibility" By Prof. Neil York

## Response by Dr. Colin Nicolson

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### Introduction

If I could go back to the age of thirty-five, Mr. Wirt, I would endeavor to become your rival; not in elegance of composition, but in a simple narration of facts, supported by records, histories, and testimonies, of irrefragable authority. . . . I would introduce portraits of a long catalogue of illustrious men, who were agents in the Revolution, in favor of it or against it.

(John Adams, 5 January 1818)

John Adams's challenge to William Wirt (1772-1834), the US attorney general and then one of America's most popular historians, was issued in a winter of contentment fondly

recalling the glory days of the American Revolution. "Your Sketches of the life of Mr. Henry have given me a rich entertainment," Adams's letter began. It was an ironic opening, for Adams proceeded to scotch the filiopietism of Wirt's recent biography of Virginian Patriot, Patrick Henry (1736-99).<sup>1</sup> Adams was not averse to creating heroes, especially in the case of Patrick Henry, of an age with Adams and whose camaraderie at the Continental Congress he warmly recounted for Wirt's benefit. But upon reading his book, Adams confessed (quoting scripture), it was as if he was "convers[ing] with the spirits of just men made perfect." His letter served polite notice of the limits of Patrick Henry's claims to perfection with a quotation in Latin from the Roman poet Horace, warning that heroic eulogies threatened to condemn the unsung to the endless night of obscurity.<sup>2</sup> Where the Virginian's fame rested upon oratory born of facile inspiration demanding Liberty or Death, Adams proceeded to recall a list of illustrious Massachusetts men and women who, before the War of Independence, had countered tyranny with learning.

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<sup>1</sup> Adams to William Wirt, 5 Jan. *Niles' Weekly Register*, New Ser. no. 16, vol. 2, 13 Jun. 1818 and *Boston Daily Advertiser*, 18 Jun. 1818. (Wirt, 1817: 486).

<sup>2</sup> Hebrews 12:23;

*Vixere fortes ante Agamemnona  
Multi: sed omnes inlacrimabiles  
Urgentur, ignotique longa  
Nocte, carent quia vate sacro.  
(Carmina, Bk 4.9: 25-29).*

Later that year, Lord Byron rendered this passage for his masterpiece *Don Juan* (canto I, stanza 5) as "Brave men were . . . living before Agamemnon . . . [but] shone not on the poet's page/And so have been forgotten."

As ever, John Adams courted hubris and unpopularity—and ridicule. If he could but turn back time he would become an historian; not a president or lawyer (as he had been), nor farmer (as he once desired), nor lawgiver (on which he hoped his posthumous fame would rest) but a historian! In this new guise Adams pledged to rescue the diminishing reputations of New England revolutionaries, his included, at some cost to the limelight for those of other regions, whom posterity would iconize as Founding Fathers. Recent histories he thought bereft of insight and rigor. But though he had published much and often about politics, the craft of history had long eluded Adams. After admonishing Wirt, he proceeded to advocate a new kind of robust history culled from documentary evidence, biography, and personal testimony. The letter to Wirt was one of over thirty or so private letters that Adams published in 1818, in which he developed a prescription for a pseudo-scientific, modernist history of the Revolution.<sup>3</sup> Producing nearly a letter per week, a schedule reminiscent of the glory days when he penned his revolutionary masterpiece, *Novanglus* (1775), he wrote, as he did then, with a public audience in mind (if not always in his sights). *Niles' Weekly Register*, with its national circulation, guaranteed Adams the largest audience he had ever known.

The octogenarian Adams was performing what he supposed would be one of the last acts in a distinguished and sometimes controversial public career. He offered poignant reminders for rising generations of Americans to acquaint themselves with what in 1775 he

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<sup>3</sup> See in particular Adams to Niles, Quincy, 14 Jan. 1818 in *Niles' Weekly Register*., 31 Jan. 1818; Adams to Niles, Quincy, 13 Feb. 1818 in *ibid.*, 7 May 1818; Adams to Tudor of 25 Feb., 29 Mar., 5 Apr., 15 Apr., and 18 Sept. 1818, in *ibid.* issues of 25 Apr., 9 May, 11 Jul., 25 Jul., and 10 Oct. 1818.

had called "revolution principles."<sup>4</sup> Six weeks after writing Wirt, Adams delivered his most famous pronouncements on the Revolution. "The Revolution was effected before the War commenced," he lectured Hezekiah Niles, proprietor of the *Weekly Register*. His first great message accorded primacy to ideology as an agent of historical change. "The Revolution was in the minds and hearts of the people. A change in their religious sentiments, of their duties and obligations." Adams second message proffered history as an intellectual anchor for the American experiment in republican government.

Were he but thirty-five again, he might write that history himself. How many of us still say that? John Adams's thirty-fifth birthday had been a glorious day. He saved a man's life. How many of us can say *that*? In *Rex v Preston*, which commenced on 24 Oct. and concluded on his birthday, 30 Oct. 1770, Adams defended a British army officer accused of murder: Captain Thomas Preston, famous for only one thing in history, something that John Adams proved he did not do—order his soldiers to shoot civilians on 5 Mar. that year. The Boston Massacre Trials were the most sensational legal trials in the history of colonial

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<sup>4</sup> *Novanglus*, No. 1, 23 Jan. 1775, *Boston Gazette*. Adams's epistolary essays often turned on the question of whether or not a "true history of the American Revolution" could ever be written by nonparticipants. Adams to Niles, 14 Jan. 1818, *Niles' Weekly Register*, New Ser. no. 1 vol. 1, 31 Jan. 1818. With so many of the revolutionary generation now deceased, taking stories and memories with them, and so much of the historical record either dispersed or destroyed, Adams was obligated to begin the inquiry anew and amass the documentation. His letters returned him to the pre-Revolution years, when in his thirties he was a witness to history in the making. For Adams, the process of sketching a history of the Revolution was didactic as well as cathartic, his open letters standing as historiographical encyclicals for his correspondents and readers to disseminate.

America, guaranteeing thirty-five year old John Adams a place in history regardless what fate had in store for him.<sup>5</sup>

## Historiography

I offer this vignette on second US president John Adams as a means of grappling with Prof. York's thesis that the presidential age requirement in the US Constitution is an issue for cultural and social history as well as constitutional and political history. The Founding Fathers "silently followed Plato" when setting the eligibility bar at thirty-five, thus demonstrating their "unspoken beliefs" (p. 45) that lawgivers in the American republic should be mature men of status and talent worthy of respect. The president, it was presumed, would be drawn from a leadership pool skilled in governance. With an average age of forty-two the delegates to the Constitutional Convention of 1787 were doubtless thinking of themselves

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<sup>5</sup> Six weeks after saving Preston from the gallows, Adams saved eight of Preston's soldiers, securing six acquittals for murder and two manslaughter verdicts. The price of fame he measured in stress not the eighteen guineas that bought Preston and his men their freedom. At thirty-five years of age, John Adams was father to five children and a husband to a wife, Abigail, who was then becoming his confidant. Gregarious and learned, he was also a fiercely independent man. He was the province's most successful barrister having eschewed Crown office and built his own practice from scratch, and had stayed clear of political activism whilst championing the colonists' cause a political writer. His heart-felt commitment to the rule of law in defending Preston and the soldiers risked opprobrium among his own people. He recalled much later the "Anxiety" that had gripped him during the trials: "I expressed to Mrs. Adams all my Apprehensions: That excellent Lady, who has always encouraged me, burst into a flood of Tears, but said she was very sensible of all the Danger to her and to our Children as well as to me." (Butterfield, 19613: 294).

when they framed the eligibility provisions for US presidents and senators. Presiding officer George Washington at fifty-five years old was unmistakably a chief executive in the waiting (the contrast with the youthful excesses of George III—king at twenty-two, "tyrant" at thirty-seven—still fresh in the memory).<sup>6</sup>

Others better qualified than I on this panel will tackle matters pertaining to US constitutional history and the influence of classical political theory. As a political historian and biographer, let me concentrate on John Adams, and consider how his intellectual preoccupations and lived experience may assist us in historicizing cultural assumptions about politicians' ages.<sup>7</sup> Prof. York has already served notice of Adams's utility. In his three-volume *Defence of the Constitutions of the Government of the United States of America* (1787-88), Adams devoted "more space" to commentaries on Plato than other favorite theorists (p. 17). Twenty-six years later, however, Adams denigrated Plato, in the company of Thomas Jefferson, as he struggled to finish reading the *Republic* and other works in their entirety for the first time (p. 16). Adams's intellectual borrowings demonstrate how the Founding Fathers creatively adapted ideas to their own circumstances and in accordance with "their own experience" (pp. 17-18). Inspired by Neil York, the question for me is not what Adams took

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<sup>6</sup> The brilliance of William Pitt the Younger (British prime minister at twenty-four) was an unknown quantity to most Americans, Adams excepted.

<sup>7</sup> Indeed, the absence of a definitive record justifying this particular provision impels us to consider it as a cultural problem: for in not deigning to explain why they acted the way they did we need to ascertain the cultural assumptions behind the provision; and these, as Prof. York suggests, point more to continuity from the colonial period than a conscious attempt to fashion a new ways of thinking.

from Plato or how and eighteenth-century Americans read Plato; rather it is how circumstances and experience reinforced or revised presumptions about leadership.

### Perspectives of John Adams

First, a caveat: we do not know if John Adams agreed or disagreed with the presidential age requirement. He probably acquiesced, in the arrogant presumption that mature men who expected to be in control always will be. Yet the senatorial class of wise and good men that Adams imagined *should* govern America was not the cast of the Constitutional Convention (with a few notable exceptions). His favored lawgivers and chief magistrates were the Old Revolutionaries, as Pauline Maier once depicted them,<sup>8</sup> the men of 1776 committed to revolutionary principles: the Adamses, Jefferson, Henry, and Washington. But in 1787 he ruled himself out. After spending thirteen years overseas as a diplomat he yearned to withdraw from public service. He never expected to be called to high office on his return to America, the following year.

Adams nonetheless aimed to stimulate Americans' discussions of state formation. His *magnum opus* on constitutionalism, *Defence of the Constitutions of the Government of the United States of America*, is neither a great book nor a book about America. It is a compendium of ancient and European historical constitutions collected for the edification of American constitution-makers, interspersed with commentaries by Adams, and accompanied by huge chunks of text copied *verbatim* from secondary sources and political theorists, often

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<sup>8</sup> (Maier, 1980).

without attribution. It remains a troubling example of creative plagiarism. Members of the Constitutional Convention had the opportunity to peruse the first volume, which Adams had compiled in London, though in the opinion of trenchant critics of Adams's constitutional writings, notably historian Gordon S. Wood, it would not have been of much help. Adams was out of touch with events in America, Wood argued in his magisterial *Creation of the American Republic* (1969).

Adams was a peripheral player in Wood's purview, intellectually as well as politically, a victim of modernity unable to appreciate the trajectory of events that hurled his countrymen and women forward to a new republican dawn. Adams "misunderstood" federalism and the complexities of *The Federalist* and found refuge in essentialism: that politics could be reduced to contests between rich and poor, between the people and the aristocracy, or, in Wood's aphorism "the few and the many." Adams's simplistic formulation for good government was to reiterate the maxims of classical republicanism that demanded virtuous politicians and advocate a strong executive power within a mixed government or balanced constitution, as found in the Massachusetts Constitution of 1780 that he had drafted. Adams became an easy target for a growing band of critics in both Federalist and Anti-Federalist camps.<sup>9</sup> For Wood, Adams exemplifies the conservative, anti-democratic tendencies of the Founders' generation, adrift from the acquisitive individualism, egalitarianism, social aspiration, and proto-capitalism that would define the republican

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<sup>9</sup> (Wood 1969: 567-592. Quotations from pp. 567 and 576)



experiment in the next century.<sup>10</sup> With that in mind, the Founders' opinions about the ages of US presidents and senators exemplified their cultural distance from nonelites.

However, the *Defence* has probably been misunderstood by historians.<sup>11</sup> In the words of Adams's principal intellectual biographer, C. Bradley Thompson, the *Defence* was conceived as a "Guidebook for Lawgivers," a practical resource for American politicians fashioning a system that might contain instability.<sup>12</sup> Plato's influence is manifest in Adams's acceptance that "constitutional decay" owed much to defects in human nature.<sup>13</sup> But Adams was also an empiricist and the task he set American politicians was to construct *modus*

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<sup>10</sup> Wood's profile of Adams is consistent with Rodgers' dichotomy of scholarship on American republicanism into "Republicanism<sub>H</sub>" and "Republicanism<sub>S</sub>." In this taxonomy, the former, as defined by Wood's work, depicts republicanism as a progressive force, both expressing and driving the transformation from early modern society to modernity. The latter form, as defined by Pocock, locates republicanism with a broader historical framework of European civic humanism that emphasizes continuity rather than transformation, as Adams's *Defence* illustrates (when measured against Pocock's summary of republican virtue). (Pocock, 1975; Rodgers, 1992)

<sup>11</sup> At the very least the *Defence* should not be read in isolation from Adam's more influential pamphlet, *Thoughts on Government* (1776), which he prepared for fellow revolutionaries engaged in the business of making state constitutions, and the Massachusetts Constitution of 1780. To that I would add the voluminous personal correspondence from Adams's retirement years, in which he ranged widely over his the tribulations of his single-term administration and political controversies of the early republic.

<sup>12</sup> (Thompson 1998: 91-106; Thompson 1998: 107-125).

<sup>13</sup> Adams explored the idea of "constitutional decay" in his survey of the ancient constitutions in the first volume of the *Defence*. He drew largely upon Plato, *Republic*, books 8 and 9. (Thompson, 1998: 139-140, 306n9).

*vivendi* for managing expectations. Adams, then, analyzed constitutions as a political scientist, interpreting the data and making recommendations so that others might systematize. His revolutionary idealism, especially in 1775 and 1776, drew inspiration from the promise of a republican government not its realization.<sup>14</sup>

Adams never troubled himself with writing a lengthy critique of the US Constitution.

*Jefferson (in Paris):* How do you like our new constitution? I confess there are things in it which stagger all my dispositions to subscribe to what such an assembly has proposed.

*Adams (in London):* The Project of a new Constitution, has Objections against it, to which I find it difficult to reconcile my self, but I am so unfortunate as to differ somewhat from you in the Articles. . . .

You are afraid of the one—I, of the few. We agree perfectly that the many should have a full fair and perfect Representation.—You are Apprehensive of Monarchy: I, of Aristocracy. I would therefore have given more Power to the President and less to the Senate."<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> The same point is made in (Rakove, 2009: 170).

<sup>15</sup> Jefferson to Adams, Paris, 13 Nov. 1787; Adams to Jefferson, London, 6 Dec. 1787. (Adams et. al and Cappon, 1959: 212-213)

This brief exchange in the winter of 1787 is a snapshot of the ideological contests that would soon divide Americans into Federalists and Anti-Federalists. The *Defence* located Adams "squarely within the mainstream of Federalist thought," Thompson wrote.<sup>16</sup> Adams was anything but irrelevant as Wood suggested he was. Thereafter, the demands of office denied Adams leisure to indulge in political analysis and constitutional history.

Retirement did, however. Let me highlight three strands in Adams's writings that illuminate his ideas on political leadership. First, Adams the realist: partisanship demanded too much of would-be statesmen, regardless of individual talent or a collective commitment to classical republican virtue. It was the statesman's lot to suffer, though not in silence. Adams gave as good as he got in a series of open letters settling old scores with enemies in both Republican and Federalist parties.<sup>17</sup> Second, Adams the idealist: as I already have

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<sup>16</sup> (Thompson, 1998: 264)

<sup>17</sup> In 1809, Adams started a sprawling series of letters to the *Boston Patriot* revisiting the troubles of his presidency (1797-1801), and continued until 1812. He spryly explained political controversies with patience, though recrimination again littered his writing. A prime target was the late Alexander Hamilton, the former secretary of the Treasury and fellow Federalist who had twice conspired against Adams when he stood for the presidency and thwarted his single-term administration at every opportunity. Adams gleefully refuted the scurrilous accusations of incompetence and malfeasance delivered by Hamilton in a pamphlet during the 1800 election, and exposed the searing and unseemly personal insults he was then obliged to suffer in silence. (Hamilton, 1800). On Adams's response to Hamilton see (Ferling, 1992). Adams also gifted Americans a trove of transcripts from his presidential correspondence justifying his record in office and his determination to deny Hamilton and the High Federalists the declaration of war against France they so ardently sought between 1797 and 1800. (Adams, 1809).

mentioned, in his letters of 1818 Adams lauded the revolutionary generation as source of inspiration for political aspirants troubled by the second British War of 1812-14, political infighting, and slavery. These times and mores called for men and women like the Old Revolutionaries—the "illustrious men, who were agents in the Revolution, in favor of it or against it." In this respect, friendship redefined political qualities requisite for statesmanship. Third, if a model statesman were needed, it was John Quincy Adams. His whole life had been preparation for high office. By the time he was thirty-five, in 1818, he was secretary of state in the Monroe administration, having evinced a sincere commitment to his father's nonpartisan ideals, which to some degree he carried forward to his single-term presidency (1825-29). By then the *cursus honorum* of high office in the American state was well established, of progression being commensurate with age and experience.

But it was not Plato, I venture, who guided the Adamses in their appreciation of statesmanship, but the Roman philosopher-statesman Cicero—whose writings were much loved by eighteenth-century Americans, John Adams in particular, who read them widely in English translations and in some erudite cases in the original Latin. Cicero's eighteenth-century reputation as an unbending opponent of tyranny has not withstood detailed scrutiny of his politics by modern scholars.<sup>18</sup> Like most highly literate men and women of the age Adams was supremely at ease with the intellectualism of daily existence, always ready to engage literary criticism, but equally adept at applying their knowledge in practical ways—including finding solutions to governmental problems. As a child of the Enlightenment in

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<sup>18</sup> See (Everitt and Ebrary Academic Complete Subscription Collection, 2003)

pursuit of happiness, Adams was inspired by Cicero (and Shakespeare and others) and constrained neither by God nor Calvin. Cicero's famous *Orations* were not just rhetorical models but political testaments: practical compromises went hand in hand with his grandiloquent appeals to consensus and nonpartisanship.<sup>19</sup> Friendship, as Cicero warned in *De Amicitia*, written in his final year of life (44BC), was far too precious a thing to be kept out of politics. Cicero became consul at forty-three years of age, roughly the same age when Adams began his unexpected European journey. US presidents, in John Adams's estimation, could do no better than aspire to the ideals of Cicero.

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<sup>19</sup> In English translation by Thomas Gordon, the *Orations* were an open window to the turbulent and fascinating last decades of the Roman Republic as well as a manual of rhetoric. We do not know if Adams or Sewall ever read Cicero's essay on friendship (which was available to him in a 1754 Latin edition) but that scarcely matters when pondering its ideas and literary devices. He certainly read Gordon's edition (his first book) and Middleton's popular biography. Ciceronian precepts and maxims were familiar to eighteenth-century readers and deeply embedded in the eighteenth-century's reinvention of Shakespeare. From Shakespeare, notably *The Tragedy of Julius Caesar*, Adams also received Cicero's messages on friendship. The play may not have been good history (reliant as it was upon Plutarch's factually inaccurate biographies) but it was the finest evocation of friendship's moral dilemmas that Adams's generation might encounter, as Garry Wills has revealed. Garry Wills, *Rome and Rhetoric: Shakespeare's Julius Caesar* (New Haven and London, 2011), 73, 145, 149. Cicero's influence on Adams can be followed in (Farrell, 1989; Farrell, 1992).

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