**John Adams: the American Cicero**

Contemporary historians often call John Adams the unsung hero of the early American era. More than any Founder, he brought Cicero to the American political forefront. Adams appreciated that as an orator, the Italian genius understood how essential proper communication was in politics and all aspects of life. Cicero referred to eloquent speech as “the queen of arts,”  Adams heartedly agreed.

John Adams was very studious. He often quoted and cited Cicero in everyday conversation. He would mimic the Roman’s strategy while practicing law in Massachusetts. If someone wanted to know Adams, he would be wise to know Cicero. Though separated by over 1,800 years, Cicero was Adams’ partner. Cicero and Adams were new men to politics and had many things in common. Cicero was a *Novos Homo,* a “New Man” to the Roman Senate. Both men earned praise through merit, not family name nor military victories. They won in courts of law through brilliant orations. Cicero was praised as *Pater Patriae*—Father of the Fatherland, while Adams was an American Founding Father. Furthermore, neither man could rely on family legacy. Adams was especially enamored of Cicero because both men came from non-elite families, Adams being the son of a shoemaker and farmer. He saw Cicero as a model of personal merit and ambition, independent of the circumstances of his birth.

John Adams’ adoration of Cicero’s orations led him to be labeled the American Cicero. He wrote:

[A] *As all the ages of the world have not produced a more remarkable statesman and philosopher united in the same character, his authority should have great weight.*

He described Cicero’s words as:

*The Sweetness and Grandeur of his sounds, and the Harmony of his Numbers give Pleasure enough to reward the Reading if one understood none of his meaning. Besides, I find it a noble Exercise. It exercises my Lungs, raises my Spirits, opens my Porrs* [pores], *quickens the Circulation, and so contributes to [my] Health”*

The Massachusetts attorney had fastidiously studied the Bible along with the classics. His father had wanted him to be a minister. Stemming from his love for Cicero and their mutual love for justice, Adams chose law as his vocation instead. The American read Cicero’s orations out loud to people during his first law cases. Adams wrote dispositions against the hated 1765 Stamp Act 1768 in Ciceronian style. “The True Sentiments of America” became the model for subsequent patriotic American protests. The daring future revolutionary had publicly questioned the authority of the British Parliament in Massachusetts. He knew he had risked the ire of British colonial leadership. Surprisingly, however, in an apparent contradiction to his opposition to

perceived Parliamentary overreach, Adams defended British soldiers in the Boston Massacre trial. The soldiers were charged with killing Adams’ fellow Bostonian citizens. Despite his antipathy towards the British government, for Adams, justice was paramount. Defending the truth and protecting the innocent were most important, not political agendas.

After the Boston Massacre in 1770, Boston mobs wanted vengeance. Nonetheless, Adams looked at the trial as he thought Cicero would have. He sought justice, not the advancement of a political agenda. Even though Adams made many Bostonians livid, he won acquittal for the soldiers from a native Bostonian jury. The trial increased Adams’ reputation for seeking truth above popularity, reminiscent of Cicero bravely accusing Catiline of conspiracy before the Senate in 63 B.C. Or his prosecuting the maliciously corrupt Gaius Verres, a malevolent magistrate in Sicily. Cicero thoroughly decimated Verres’ defense. His accusations were so devastatingly trenchant that Verres’ defense advocate could only recommend that the magistrate leave Italy posthaste.

Notwithstanding his defense of British soldiers, John Adams was a committed opponent of British overreach in the colonies. He served as a delegate to the 1st Continental Congress in 1774 and the 2nd Congress in 1775-1776, both in Philadelphia. Adams wrote newspaper letters between the Congresses advocating liberty under the *nom de plume*, *Novanglus.* In his letters, he averred the revolutionary principles of Aristotle and Plato, Roman historian Livy, and Cicero. He infused their thoughts with more modern British political philosophers: Algernon Sydney, James Harrington, and John Locke. There was no doubt as to where Adams stood.

As vain as he was in Ciceronian mold, Adams was humble and wise enough to nominate a Virginian, George Washington, as commander-in-chief of the Army. The Congress sent Washington to save Adams’ Massachusetts from British occupation. He also selected the younger Thomas Jefferson to write the Declaration of Independence. Under his authorship, he had feared some people would reject the Declaration due to wounds he had regularly inflicted on them with his sharply acerbic tongue.

Throughout the first part of 1776, Adams spoke at the Continental Congress every day, persistently urging independence. Even when Richard Henry Lee introduced a resolution to declare independence on June 7, 1776, most delegates would instead have waited. Nearly all delegates reported that John Adams’s two-hour oration in a style he had learned from Cicero tipped the scales for Independence. Adams was:

*The man to whom the country is most indebted for independency*.

And later some added:

*For the country that was born in Philadelphia that day, we have*

*Adams — and Cicero — to thank.*

More than any Founder, John Adams was responsible for getting the thirteen colonies to declare their liberty from imperial British control.

Back in Massachusetts, Adams wrote the 1780 Massachusetts Constitution. Cicero had given him the idea of a mixed government with three branches, with checks and balances of one another. The American Founder ensured it was approved by a ratification convention of the people, not any legislature. The Massachusetts Constitution thus stood as the Law and had priority over the government. The government was subject to the Law. It is currently the oldest written constitution in the world. Ratification of the U.S. Constitution followed the Massachusetts precedent and is the second oldest written constitution still in effect.

Once the new nation had declared its independence, like Cicero, Adams continued to dedicate all his efforts to public service. He went to France and the Netherlands to get loans for the fledging nation. Once the war was won, he went back to Paris to, along with Jefferson and John Jay, negotiate the treaty that ended the war and officially awarded the United States internationally recognized independence.

Once the United States was free and independent, Adams was appointed ambassador to the Court of St James in London. He was presented to King George III as the new and free United States ambassador. George III was highly irritated. Less than a decade earlier, the King wanted Adams, above all the revolutionaries, hanged for treason. While in London in 1787, with his Ciceronian wording and clarity, he vigorously wrote “A Defense of the Constitutions of the United States of America,” using many of Cicero’s arguments for a constitution. Prominent historian Gordon Wood calls Adams’ work the finest fruit of the American Enlightenment. The participants in the Constitutional Convention used Adams' opus as they developed the new document that would run the nation for nearly 250 years and is still the ultimate Law of the land.

Upon his return to Massachusetts, Adams was elected Vice President for two terms. Once Washington chose not to run for a third term, Adams was elected President. There, he handled the quasi-war with France amid the French Revolutionary War with most of Europe. He signed the Alien and Sedition Acts passed by the Federalist Congress at the encouragement of his wife, Abigail, in fear of a “godless” French Republican invasion of the United States. The Federalists also feared a Jeffersonian Republican takeover and a similar reign of terror spreading to the U.S.

Finally, the 2nd President was successful and ended the war with France with the *Treaty of Mortefontaine of 1800*. Unfortunately for Adams, news of this monumental success did not reach American shores until he lost a close election to Jefferson. If the news had come earlier, most scholars believe Adams would have won a second term. Like Cicero, Adams fell from grace because he went against popular opinion when he thought it was in the best interest of his

country. Americans had wanted a full-scale war against France. Adams patiently, however, waited out the naval war for peace.

In ancient Rome, Cicero’s call for reforms had gone unheeded. Likewise, Adams’ ideas were stopped by the political realities. After he lost the election of 1800, he wrote Dr. Benjamin Rush:

*I'm just like Cicero, you know, all the parties rejected Cicero, and now all the parties are leaving me.*

Adams’ prodigious contributions to the American Founding are sometimes overlooked. Yet, any competent study of the period will appreciate the firm Ciceronian, Italian foundation from which Adams helped construct a new nation, securely anchored in the principles of liberty and natural rights.

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