

Citizen Leadership in the Young Republic

The Father-Son Letters of John Adams & John Quincy Adams

FOLLOW-UP ASSIGNMENT

In 1800, John Quincy Adams wrote a letter of condolence to his father, John Adams, after his father's defeat for a second term as president of the United States. Read excerpts from John Quincy Adams's letter on pages 2-3 to complete the two exercises below.

■ **The Father Guides His Son.** In the exercise below, match each trait of citizen leadership in Column A with the statement in Column B in which John Adams encouraged that trait in his son.

 A

 B

 1. Bases decisions on overarching principles rather than short-sighted goals.

 2. Puts the nation's interests ahead of one's personal interests.

 3. Avoids political divisiveness in order to pursue the common good.

 4. Conducts negotiations skillfully with other nations (and, if necessary, war).

 5. Understands that a life of public service requires personal sacrifices.

 6. Preserves one's moral character.

A. "... I hope you will all follow the virtuous Example [of the Patriots] if, in any future Time, your Country's Liberties should be in Danger, and suffer every human Evil [hardship], rather than Give them up." April 18, 1776

B. "as the future Circumstances of your Country, may require other Wars, as well as Councils and Negotiations, . . . I wish to turn your Thoughts early to such Studies, as will afford you the most solid Instruction and Improvement for the Part which may be allotted you to act on the Stage of Life." Aug. 11, 1777

C. "But above all Things, my son, take Care of your Behavior and preserve the Character you have acquired, for Prudence and Solidity." May 14, 1783

D. "The true Interest and honor of your Country should be your only Object." [before 8] Sept. 1790

E. "Admire neither Party—despise neither Party. Treat both Sides with Civility and respect but be the Devotee of neither. Be always on the side of Truth, Justice, Honor, Virtue, and public Spirit." Oct. 4, 1790

F. "... I am happy to observe that you have not accommodated your opinions nor Sentiments to the momentary Fashions of the present times, but have Searched for Principles which will be more durable." Dec. 14, 1793

■ **The Son Honors His Father.** In his 1800 letter, John Quincy commended his father for exhibiting traits of citizen leadership that Adams had fostered in him. For each trait below, identify (by sentence number) one or more sentences in John Quincy's letter in which he honors that trait in his father.

 Bases decisions on overarching principles rather than short-sighted goals.

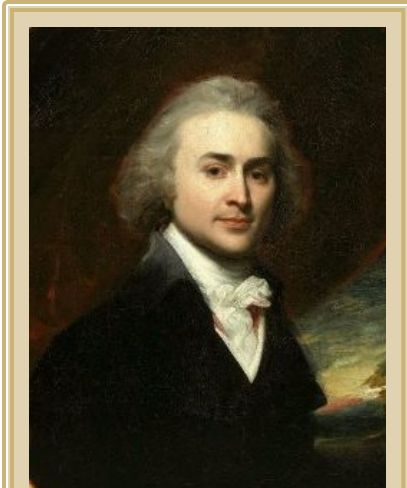
 Puts the nation's interests ahead of one's personal interests.

 Avoids political divisiveness in order to pursue the common good.

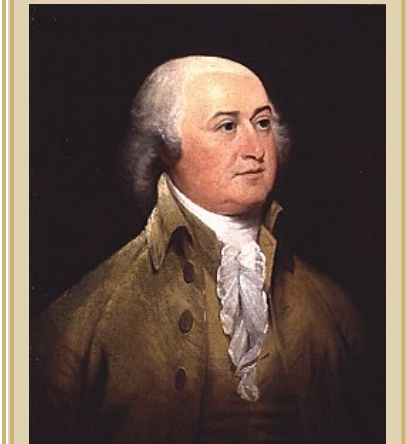
 Conducts negotiations (and, if necessary, war) with other nations skillfully.

 Understands that a life of public service requires personal sacrifices.

 Preserves one's moral character.



John Quincy Adams, 1796
John Singleton Copley • Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



John Adams, 1793
John Trumbull • National Portrait Gallery

JOHN QUINCY ADAMS TO JOHN ADAMS NOVEMBER 25, 1800 [EXCERPTS]

At age 33, John Quincy Adams wrote this letter to his father, John Adams, who was completing his four-year term as president of the United States. Three weeks earlier, Adams had been defeated by Thomas Jefferson in a close popular election, partly due to Adams's decision to negotiate peace with France during the "Quasi-War" of 1798-1800—a move that heeded Washington's warning to avoid foreign entanglements but angered many Americans who sought reprisal for France's actions in the war. In his letter of consolation, John Quincy commended his father's dedication to the values of citizen leadership that he had assiduously fostered in his son.

My Dear Sir . . .

¹As I know that from the earliest period of your political life you have always made up your account to meet sooner or later such treatment in return for every sacrifice and every toil, I hope and confidently believe that you will be prepared to bear this event with calmness and composure, if not with indifference; that you will not suffer [allow] it to prey upon your mind or affect your health; nor even to think more hardly of your country than she deserves. ²Her truest friends, I am persuaded, will more keenly feel your removal from the head of her administration than yourself. ³Your long settled and favorite pursuits of literature and of farming will give you full employment, and prevent that craving void of the mind which is so apt to afflict statesmen out of place, . . .

"you have always made up your account . . .": you have always understood that a civic leader might receive only criticism and rejection despite the sacrifice and hardship demanded of public office.

⁴In your retirement you will have not only the consolation of a consciousness that you have discharged all the duties of a virtuous citizen, but the genuine pleasure of reflecting that, by the wisdom and firmness of your administration you left that very country in safe and honorable peace, which at the period of your entrance into office was involved in dangerous and complicated disputes with more than one formidable foreign power. ⁵That without the smallest sacrifice of national honor and dignity you have succeeded in settling a quarrel with France which, under any other system of conduct than that which you pursued, would at this moment have burst into a most ruinous and fatal war, or could only be pacified by disgraceful and burdensome humiliations. ⁶The merit of this system, too, is so entirely and exclusively your own, that we are told it was disapproved by almost all the principal leaders of the party friendly to the constitution and the union, the great supporters of your last election [Federalist Party]. ⁷Nay, the general opinion is, that to this defection of your friends, originating solely in your adherence to the system you had adopted against their opinions, must be ascribed your removal from the chair [presidency] at this time. ⁸Indeed, my dear sir, if this be the case, it is not your fame or honor that will suffer by the result. ⁹The common and vulgar herd of statesmen and warriors are so wont [desirous] to promote on every occasion their private and personal interest at the expense of their country, that it will be a great and glorious preeminence for you to have exhibited an example of the

“a statesman who made the sacrifice of his own interest and influence to the real and unquestionable benefit of his country”

magistrate [top official in the executive branch/president], with their situation on the same day 1801, when I here suppose they will cease. . . . ¹¹Had you been the man of one great party [Democratic-Republican] which divides the people of the United States, you might have purchased peace by tribute under the name of loans and bribes, under that of presents, by sacrificing with pleasure, as one of the leaders of that party formally avowed his disposition to do, the rights of the Union to the pleasure of France by answering her injuries with submission and her insults with crouching. ¹²Had you been the man of the other party [Federalist Party], you would have lost the only favorable moment for negotiating peace to the best advantage, and at this moment would have seen the United States at open war with an enemy in the highest exultation of victory, without an ally and, in the general opinion of the world if not in real truth, little better than once more a colony of Great Britain. ¹³In resisting, therefore, with all the energy which your constitutional power enabled you to exercise and all your personal influence could excite among your countrymen, the violence of France, you saved the honor of the American name from disgrace and prepared the way for obtaining fair terms of reconciliation. ¹⁴By sending the late mission you restored an honorable peace to the nation, without tribute, without bribes, without violating any previous engagement, without the abandonment of any claim of right, and without even exciting the resentment of the great enemy of France [Great Britain]. ¹⁵You have, therefore, given the most decisive proof that in your administration you were the man not of any party, but of the whole nation, and if the eyes of faction [political division] will shut themselves against the value of such a character, if even the legal and constitutional judgment of your country as expressed by their suffrages [votes] at an election will be insensible to it, you can safely and confidently appeal from the voice of heated and unjust passions, to that of cool and equitable reason, from the prejudices of the present to the sober decision of posterity [future generations].

Ever devotedly yours.

[John Quincy Adams]

“You have, therefore, given the most decisive proof that in your administration you were the man not of any party, but of the whole nation”

contrary, of a statesman who made the sacrifice of his own interest and influence to the real and unquestionable benefit of his country. . . .

¹⁰Let then a thinking and impartial man compare the situation of the United States on the 4th of March, 1797, when you assumed the functions of their first Executive

“Let then a thinking . . .”: let an unbiased man compare the country’s situation in 1797, when you became president, with its situation when you leave office next year. In 1797, it seemed unavoidable that the U.S. would go to war with France. But now, at the end of your presidency, the U.S. has achieved a solid and dependable peace with France.

“purchased peace by tribute”: the peace negotiators sent to France by Adams were told that the U.S. would have to promise loans to France and pay a large bribe to its foreign minister Talleyrand. The team refused. [XYZ Affair]

By sending the late mission . . .”: by sending the diplomatic team to negotiate peace with France, you ended the “Quasi War” with honor, without giving money to the French leaders as “tribute” or as bribes, without violating any treaty or giving up any American claim to land, trade, etc., and without angering Great Britain—France’s enemy and the restored U.S. ally (by the Jay Treaty of 1794).

John Trumbull, portrait of John Adams, oil on canvas, 1793. National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, NPG 75.52 / Art Resource, NY. Reproduced by permission.
John Singleton Copley, portrait of John Quincy Adams, oil on canvas, 1796 (detail). Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Bequest of Charles Francis Adams, 17:1077. Reproduced by permission.