



Citizen Leadership in the Young Republic

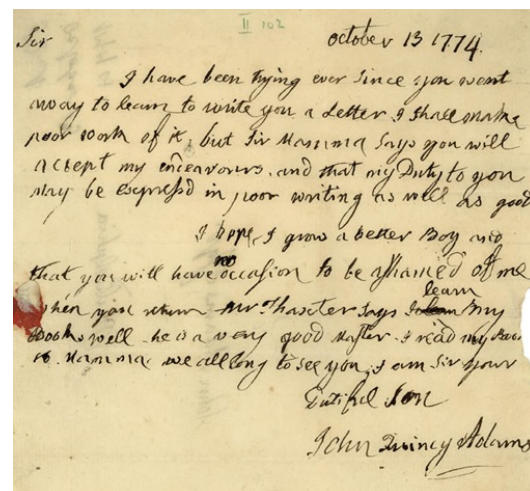
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Framing Question

What qualities of citizen leadership did John Adams consider essential to sustain and nurture the young republic? How do his letters to his growing son John Quincy reveal his point of view about the new nation?

Understanding

In this study of the letters of John Adams and John Quincy Adams from 1774 to 1793, two central themes are highlighted — how Adams unfolded his “curriculum” for citizen leadership, and how his point of view changed from parent–teacher to mentor–guide as John Quincy entered the realm of American political life. To Adams, a citizen leader of the United States needed to exhibit upstanding moral character and self-discipline, acquire a solid foundation in classical learning, develop keen insight into the political dynamics of a democracy, and accept the challenges and sacrifices of public life. As his son grew from a child into a young man, John Adams fostered these qualities through the long-distance medium of letters.



John Quincy Adams to John Adams, 1774

Text

[Selected Letters of John Adams & John Quincy Adams, 1774–93](#)

Background

John Adams and John Quincy Adams were the nation’s first father–son presidents (the second being George H. W. Bush and George W. Bush). John Adams served as the second president from 1797 to 1801, and John Quincy Adams took office twenty-four years later as the sixth president, from 1825 to 1829. At age 89, John Adams was thrilled with his son’s election, writing him that “Never did I feel so much solemnity as upon this occasion. The multitude of my thoughts, and the intensity of my feelings are too much for a mind like mine, in its ninetieth year.” [February 18, 1825]

John Adams's concept of citizen leader was shaped by his experiences in the Continental Congress and as a U.S. diplomat to European countries during and after the Revolution. He understood that the new nation needed a new type of citizen leader — one that championed the revolutionary ideals of liberty and democracy while understanding the young nation's vulnerability to political divisiveness, inexperience, and isolation. With this in mind, Adams set out to nurture his sons, especially firstborn John Quincy, as citizen leaders who would take the nation securely into the nineteenth century. This goal reflects John Adams's oft-quoted statement of his duty as a father and Founding Father: "I must study Politicks and War that my sons may have liberty to study Painting and Poetry, Mathematicks and Philosophy. My sons ought to study Mathematicks and Philosophy, Geography, Natural History, Naval Architecture, Navigation, Commerce and Agriculture, in order to give their Children a right to study Painting, Poetry, Musick, Architecture, Statuary, Tapestry and Porcelaine." [letter to Abigail Adams, May 12, 1780]

When young John Quincy was seven years old, John Adams left their Massachusetts home to serve as a delegate to the First Continental Congress in Philadelphia. Little did they know that the Adams family would rarely live together again as Adams served a long civic career in America and Europe. These selections from the father-son letters follow John Adams's long-distance guidance of his son's upbringing. From the outset, Adams stressed moral character and the value of classical learning (Greek and Roman classics). The goal of education, he wrote to thirteen-year-old John Quincy, is "to make you a good Man and a useful Citizen. This will ever be the Sum total of the Advice of your affectionate Father." After John Quincy completed his formal education and began his adult life as a young lawyer, his father guided his entry into the turbulent world of politics, stressing that "the true interest and honor of your Country should be your only Object."

The letters in this lesson span twenty years, from 1774 to 1793, and follow John Adams from age 38 to 58 and John Quincy from age seven to 26. They focus on three phases in John Quincy's maturation:

- ages 7–10, as a child at home with his mother and siblings during the Revolutionary War.
- ages 12–18, as a student in Europe and America, often separated from his family.
- ages 23–26, as a Harvard graduate and a lawyer beginning his practice in Boston.

Soon after the course of these letters, John Quincy Adams began his lifetime career as a citizen leader, serving as a U.S. diplomat to the

Contextualizing Questions

1. What kind of text are we dealing with?
2. When was it written?
3. Who wrote it?
4. For what audience was it intended?
5. For what purpose was it written?



John Quincy Adams (left) and John Adams, 1783



John Quincy Adams, 1796

Netherlands, Prussia, Russia, and Great Britain (UK); and as a U.S. Senator, Secretary of State, and as the sixth president of the United States (1825–1829). After his presidency, he represented his Massachusetts district in the U.S. House of Representatives from 1831 until his death in 1848.

Underlined words are defined in the Glossary at the end of this document.

Text Analysis

John Quincy Adams (age 9) to John Adams (age 41)

June 2, 1777

Dear Sir,

I Love to receive Letters very well, much better than I love to write them. I make but a poor figure at Composition; my head is much too fickle, my Thoughts are running after birds' eggs, play, and trifles, till I get vexed with myself. Mamma has a troublesome task to keep me Steady, and I own [admit] I am ashamed of myself.... I wish, sir, you would give me Some instructions with regard to my time and advise me how to proportion [schedule] my Studies and my Play, in writing, and I will keep them by me and endeavour to follow them.... John Quincy Adams

Activity: Understanding the Adams Letters

This activity will help you summarize the letter excerpts in this 'Text Analysis' section.



How does nine-year-old John Quincy present himself to his father? What is his point of view?

What can we infer about the influence of John Quincy's mother, Abigail Adams, in the writing of his letter? Cite evidence from the letter.

What can we hypothesize about her goals for her children's communication with their father?

John Adams (age 41) to John Quincy Adams (age 10)

July 27, 1777

My dear Son,

If it should be the Design of Providence [will of God] that you should live to grow up, you will naturally feel a Curiosity to learn the History of the Causes which have produced the late [recent/ongoing] Revolution of our Government. No Study in which you can engage will be more worthy of you. It will become [benefit] you to make yourself Master of [become well informed about] all the considerable Characters [people] which have figured upon the Stage of civil, political or military Life. This you ought to do with the Utmost Candor, Benevolence, and Impartiality, and if you should now and then meet with an Incident which shall throw some Light upon your Father's Character, I charge you to consider it with an Attention only to Truth. You will wonder, my dear son, at my writing to you at your tender [young] Age such dry Things as these, but if you keep this Letter you will in some future Period thank your Father for writing it.... John Adams

How does John Adams present himself to his young son? What is his point of view? Cite evidence from the letter.

What is the time span between John Quincy's letter and his father's reply? How far did the letter have to travel?

How does Adams's tone change at the end of the letter? Cite evidence from the letter.

John Adams (age 41) to John Quincy Adams (age 10)

August 11, 1777

My dear Son,

As the War in which your Country is engaged will probably hereafter attract your Attention more than it does at this Time, and as the future Circumstances of your Country may require other Wars, as well as Councils and Negotiations, similar to those which are now in Agitation, 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.... John Adams

What evidence does this letter offer to suggest that Adams sees his son as a future citizen leader?

**John Adams (age 54) to John Quincy Adams (age 23)
before September 8, 1790**

Dear Sir...

If you meddle with political subjects, let me Advise you to never lose sight of Decorum. Assume a Dignity above all Personal Reflections: and avoid as much as possible a Party [partisan] Spirit. The true Interest and honor of your Country should be your only Object. And may you be a Terror to those evil Doers to whom Truth and Falsehood are equally but sport, honor but a Phantom [illusion], and their own insignificant importance their only objects....
John Adams

How has John Adams's point of view changed since 1777, now that he is Vice President of the United States and his son, a Harvard graduate, is setting up a law practice in Boston?

To this point, how had John Adams unfolded his "curriculum" to prepare his son for citizen leadership?

**John Adams (age 54) to John Quincy Adams (age 23)
September 13, 1790**

Dear John,

I wrote you before today: but I forgot to say Several Things. Have you ever attended a Town Meeting? You may there learn the Ways of Men, and penetrate Several Characters [gain insight into specific political leaders and how they exercise power] which otherwise You would not know. There are Several Objects of Enquiry which I would point out to your consideration without making any noise or parade about them.

1. The State of Parties [factions, interest groups, political parties] in Religion, Government Manners, Fashions.
2. The Leading Characters in Church and State.
3. The Machines [mechanisms], Arts and Channels by which Intelligence [news] and Reports are circulated through the Town [i.e., news media and modes of verbal news exchange]
4. The Makers and Spreaders of Characters [e.g., political mentors, power brokers, pundits and opinion makers, determiners of reputations]

5. The State of the various Tradesmen and Mechanics, their Views, designs [goals], and Projects
6. The State, Hopes, Views, Plans, Passions, and Sentiments of the old Tories [Loyalists], and their Correspondencies abroad [overseas] and at home in their own State and in other States.
7. Ditto of the old Whigs of 1764 and 1774 [Patriots who led the Massachusetts opposition to the Stamp Act of 1764 and the Coercive Acts of 1775, after the Boston Tea Party]
8. Ditto of the Neutrals.
9. Ditto of those who have Sprung up Since the Revolution.
10. The Characters [leaders and their reputations] of all the Clergymen of all denominations, Physicians, surgeons, Apothecaries [pharmacists], Lawyers, and Merchants of Eminence [influential businessmen] & shopkeepers.
11. The Foreigners in or out of offices, French, English, Dutch, etc.
12. The Various Combinations of all these.
13. The State of Diversions, Amusements, Spectacles, etc.
14. The various Clubs, Lists [of members] of all which you should obtain.
15. The Buffoons, the Merry Andrews [public clowns], the story tellers, the song Singers, the Mimics.

These are all Wheels, Springs, Cogs, or Pins, Some of them dirty ones which compose the [social-political] Machine and make it go.... Write me as often as possible. Don't show my Letters. J. A.

In these letters of 1790, what new guidance does Adams offer his son?

Which statement below best describes the list of fifteen “objects of inquiry” that John Adams urges his son to study in a Boston town meeting? Explain your answer.

- A. The list encompasses the social-political dynamics in northern and middle Atlantic cities at the time.
- B. The list identifies the political parties in America since independence, and their major principles.
- C. The list reflects Adams’s broad civic career in the United States and Europe.

Consider John Adams’s machine metaphor — “the Wheels, Springs, Cogs, or Pins, Some of them dirty ones which compose the Machine.” Why is this metaphor a suitable choice for the political dynamics Adams wants his son to observe?

How does John Adams differentiate between the elements of the political machine that are “dirty ones” and those that are not?

Why might Adams have urged John Quincy to observe the town meeting “without making any noise or parade,” and why might he have closed with “don’t show my Letters”?

John Quincy Adams (age 23) to John Adams (age 54)

October 19, 1790

Dear Sir....

I have attended a Town-meeting, Sir, and it was upon the occasion of the choice of [congressional] Representative for the district. I was indeed not a little diverted [amused] at the scene and derived I believe some little Instruction as well as Entertainment from it. Three fourths of the Votes in this Town were indeed for Mr: Ames, and this perhaps may enable you to form an opinion respecting the popularity of the general [federal] Government in this State.... The real fact is that the new Government is very rapidly acquiring a broad and solid foundation of popularity. It possesses in my opinion the confidence of the people in this State to a more eminent degree than any other Government upon Earth can boast of: and it appears to me to have already acquired a stability as astonishing as the revolution it has produced in the face of our affairs. The effects of that revolution [i.e., the first government under the new constitution] are already felt in a very high degree in this part of the Country. Our Commerce is increasing and extending; our manufactures multiplying very rapidly, our agriculture flourishing. Industry has resumed the place which it had resigned for some time to idleness [lack of activity] and luxury, and is seldom without employ. I am informed that the mechanics of almost every description in this Town are at present more constantly busy than they have been at any period since the Revolution.... The farmer, the tradesmen, the mechanic and the merchant, are all mutually so dependent upon one another for their prosperity, that I really know not whether most to pity the ignorance or to lament the absurdity of the partial [partisan] politicians, who are constantly erecting an imaginary wall of separation between them.... J. Q. Adams.

What is John Quincy Adams’s point of view in reporting his observations from the town meeting?

How do his observations reveal a grown-up perspective and a maturing political eye?

At the same time, how do his observations reflect youthful enthusiasm and political inexperience?

Has John Quincy followed his father's "assignment" in reporting his observations at a town meeting?

John Quincy Adams (age 25) to John Adams (age 57)

December 16, 1792

My dear Sir....

...There has been upon my mind a strong sentiment of delicacy [courtesy] which has kept me silent in the midst of all the scurrility of which you have been the object. The charges which private malice and public faction have employed as instruments [tools/weapons] against you have been so despicable in themselves that common sense and Common Honesty must have felt some degradation in descending to the refutation of them. I have thought that where they could have any possible effect, sober reason and plain truth could not counteract it, because the minds affected must be too blind or too wicked to feel the operation of just Sentiments [to be open to unbiased opinion].... J. Q. Adams.

Which statement best summarizes the exchange between John Adams (Vice President of the United States) and John Quincy Adams (Boston lawyer) in these letters? Explain your answer.

- A. They agree that newspapers should not be allowed to print partisan attacks on public officials.
- B. They disagree about the extent of newspapers' power to influence public opinion.
- C. They disagree about the appropriate response to partisan attacks in the newspapers.

John Adams (age 57) to John Quincy Adams (age 25)

December 26, 1792

My dear Son...

Your Observations on the Scurrility disgorged [hurled] at me, as well as on the insidious Attacks on the general Government, are just [correct] to a certain degree, but not wholly so. The Newspapers guide and lead and form the public opinion.... We shall never have a fair Chance for a good Government until it is made a rule to let nothing pass unanswered. Reasoning must be answered by reasoning: Wit by Wit, Humor by Humor: Satire by Satire: Burlesque by Burlesque, and even Buffoonery by Buffoonery. The stupidity of Multitudes of good Friends of their Country and its Government is astonishing. They are carried away with every Wind of Doctrine and every political Lie, but the Docility with which they receive an answer when it is put into their Mouths is the only resource We have left. Hundreds even of the Officers of Government Stand aghast like Children not knowing what to think nor what to Say until another Gazette [newspaper] furnishes them with Matter.... J. A.

Activity: Analyzing Tone in Nonfiction

This activity analyzes John Adams's tone in his letter about partisan attacks, public opinion, and the media.



John Adams replies that John Quincy's comments are accurate "to a certain degree, but not wholly so." How does he agree and disagree with John Quincy's appraisal?

What is "the only resource we have left" to counter "scurrility," according to John Adams?

At what point in the letter does John Adams's tone escalate in its intensity? Explain your answer.

- A. Sentence 3: "We shall never have a fair Chance"
- B. Sentence 4: "Reasoning must be answered"
- C. Sentence 5: "The stupidity of Multitudes"
- D. The letter maintains the same tone throughout.

Glossary

benevolence: good will, kindness, open-mindedness

candor: sincerity, openness, honesty

decorum: proper respectful behavior, civil conduct, manners

docility: readiness to yield to the wishes and opinions of others, submissiveness

eminent: high or great (in this usage)

insidious: sly, cunning, underhanded

lament: mourn, be saddened and discouraged by

scurrility: noun obsolete; current use of adjective scurrilous: abusive, vulgar, hateful, slanderous

trifles: trivial, unimportant things

vexed: annoyed, irritated

Text of Adams letters courtesy of the Massachusetts Historical Society, in The Adams Family Papers (MHS) and in Founders Online (National Archives).

Images:

- John Quincy Adams, letter to John Adams, October 13, 1774 (detail). Massachusetts Historical Society. Permission request submitted.
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