

Lesson Thirty-Nine

John Adams

LESSON IDEA

To show the qualities of character and acts of statesmanship which made John Adams a great American.

PREPARATION

Borrow one of the following books from your local library for the project suggested in "During The Week": *John Adams* by John T. Morse, Jr., *John Adams* by Anne Burleigh, or *John Adams* by Page Smith.

THE YEAR was 1781. At Yorktown, Virginia, the British General Cornwallis had surrendered to American Commander-in-Chief George Washington. The War for Independence had been won, the British defeated, and a new nation established! Or so most Americans thought.

It was true that the war of fife, drum, musket, and cannon was over. Yet the fruits of victory could still be squandered by terms of the treaty yet to be signed. America remained surrounded by potentially hostile adversaries. Spain controlled much of the Mississippi on her western frontier, and an important piece of property (Florida) to the south. England still dominated the ocean on the east. And both France and England commanded forts and controlled waterways in the west and in Canada.

It was clearly possible that, in the wake of military victory over England, the newly united states could nevertheless have their hard won independence stripped away by the ambitious and quarrelsome nations that still surrounded them. The eventual outcome would largely depend on the post-war pact to be signed with England.

Can you think of any wars that the United States has won on the battlefield yet lost in subsequent treaty negotiations? [World War II is a revealing example battlefield victory lost at the conference

table. The supposed reason for fighting was to secure freedom for nations such as Poland, yet shortly after the allied "victory," Poland and most other countries of Eastern Europe were surrendered to Soviet tyranny. They had been rescued from the Nazi threat only to be delivered to the burgeoning communist empire by our treaty-makers.]

The defeat of Cornwallis at Yorktown in 1781 was not the end of the struggle for independence, but rather a new beginning. The American treaty-makers had to safeguard the battlefield triumph. The Continental Congress had assigned some of its ablest men to protect the new nation's interests in negotiations, including Benjamin Franklin, John Jay, and Arthur Lee. But the one who

proved to be the most astute and successful of them all was Massachusetts statesman John Adams.

Adams appeared to have few attributes of the diplomats of the day. In the European tradition, diplomacy was viewed as an intricate and duplicitous game played by those most adept at social grace, political intrigue, and saying one thing while intending another. John Adams seemed peculiarly unqualified for the role. He was restless and outspoken by temperament, eager to push forward with the business at hand, and hopelessly incapable of

concealing his true motives and honestly held opinions.

It was not difficult for sophisticated politicians to read Adams' mind, but it quickly became evident to them that he could not be bullied, outmaneuvered, or bribed. He was shrewd at assessing character and had a sharp mind finely honed by a deep understanding of history and law. Arriving in Europe as the representative of a financially exhausted infant nation of loosely united colonies,



John Adams

FOR SERIOUS STUDENTS

John Adams was a statesman, not a mere politician. He was denied a second term as President due to underhanded maneuvers by members of his own cabinet. It was during his Administration that the first divisive political parties began to form. Among the forces encouraging this division were conspiratorial organizations that had been established in America to spread the subversive agenda of the French Revolution. A simplified yet accurate account of these events may be found in *John Adams*, by John T. Morse, Jr. (especially chapters 10-12).

his dignified and confident bearing gave the impression that he represented one of the world's great powers. Biographer John T. Morse describes his diplomatic acumen in these words:

Had the business of the colonies been conducted by a diplomatist of the European school ... endeavoring to meet art with wiles, and diplomatic lies with professional falsehood, valuable time would surely have been lost, and smaller advantages would probably have been gained; but Adams strode along stoutly, in broad daylight, breaking the snares which were set for his feet, shouldering aside those who sought to crowd him from his path, unceremonious, making direct for his goal, with his eyes wide open and his tongue not silent to speak the plain truth. Certainly this trans-Atlantic negotiator excited surprise by his ... untraditional conduct among the ministers and envoys of the European cabinets; but in the end he proved too much for them all; their peculiar skill was of no avail against his novel and original tactics: their covert indirection would not stand before his blunt directness. So he carried his points with brilliant success.

Under Adams' leadership, the United States wrested from England each of the concessions it most wanted, and which the British least wanted to give. Boundary lines were drawn in the Americans' favor. All that England could reasonably be asked to grant concerning navigation on the Mississippi River was agreed to. A British demand that all Tories and loyalists be reimbursed for their losses during the war whittled

down to a meaningless stipulation that Congress would use its influence with the states to minimize legal obstacles in the collection of debts. Fishing rights off the eastern coast, which were crucial to the economy New England (but also coveted by Britain and France), were granted to the Americans. And perhaps most important of all, England's negotiators agreed to recognize the new nation as just that — a full-fledged nation, not merely 13 disobedient colonies.

THE PERSISTENCE AND BOLDNESS that characterized his efforts to win the treaty-making battle had enabled Adams score an earlier victory in the critical area of area of finance. During the war, money was desperately needed to equip the Continental Army. France had partially answered the American plea for help, but more was needed. Adams was convinced, however, that the additional funds should come from another source, lest the colonies become so obligated to France that they could be compelled to bow to French demands after the war. There was the very real prospect of losing independence by becoming little more than a puppet of Paris, and thereafter being dragged into endless European wars and intrigues.

After carefully analyzing the situation from his diplomatic post in France, Adams decided to approach the bankers and moneylenders of Holland. He sought to be received as the American minister, which would have meant diplomatic recognition of the United States and the opening of doors to loans and trade agreements between the two countries. But as he began his tour of the Netherlands in 1780, he ran into a wall of ignorance and indifference. Few of his hosts seemed to know or care about the existing plight, or potential prosperity and trade potential, of the new American nation.

How do you suppose Adams reacted to the dilemma? What would you have done? [Ask everyone for an opinion.]

As usual, Adams' dedication to his country and her needs overruled his personal pride and impatience. He had a goal in mind, and he intended to work toward it with all of the energy and ability at his command. The most viable solution seemed ominous: he would have to become a combination journalist, teacher, and writer — a one-man edu-

cational army who could prove America's worth to the Netherlands.

It was a prodigious undertaking, entailing a struggle against Dutch ignorance and the diplomatic intrigue of both France and England. The French, anxious to increase America's dependence on them and preclude the new nation from developing cordial ties with other European countries, apparently instructed their Dutch representative to do everything possible to undermine Adams' efforts. Only after Adams bluntly warned the conniving diplomat that neither his advice, nor that of higher French officials including the King himself, could deter him did the diplomatic obstruction recede.

For its part, Britain flexed its military muscle at Holland, intimidating the war-shy nation to the point that no merchant or banker of any influence would even acknowledge that an American agent was in the country.

Undeterred, Adams continued to write, talk, and teach.

EVENTUALLY, ENGLAND'S bullyboy behavior led to a wave of Dutch indignation. Coupled with that reaction came news that Cornwallis had surrendered at Yorktown. Adams perceived that the time was ripe to press for recognition as United States minister. It was a gamble that, had it failed, might have branded him a reckless man whose bad judgment had led to failure. But Adams, placing what he perceived to be his country's best interests ahead of concern about his personal reputation, plunged ahead.

Holland's leaders met his bold request with the timid claim that they would have to consult the voters. Adams was delighted, since he felt certain that his educational efforts had molded public opinion in his favor. He was right. On April 19, 1782, Holland formally installed the Massachusetts statesman as minister representing the United States of America. The desperately needed loans and trade agreements quickly followed.

Few of his fellow citizens realized the full import of Adams' monumental triumph (he would later look back on it as his greatest achievement). It represented, as he termed it, a "barrier against all dangers from the house of Bourbon [France]" and "present security against England."

Like George Washington, Adams was gifted

with keen insight and the ability to perceptively analyze and understand complex issues. In the early stages of the struggle for independence, when others were entertaining thoughts of reconciliation with England, the young Boston lawyer realized that the growing friction between the mother country and her colonies could not be reduced short of war. He was saddened by that conclusion, but as a knowledgeable student of history knew that it could not be avoided. Realist that he was, he undoubtedly foresaw the hardships that lay ahead, yet he never hesitated to do that which his country asked of him.

It was his strong sense of right and wrong that drew him into the battle and kept him there until his death at age 91. Following the "Boston Massacre" in 1770, when a small force of British soldiers, driven by fear and panic, opened fire on an angry mob of Boston citizens, killing three (two others died later) and wounding eight. The British governor sought to place Adams on the spot by asking him to defend the Redcoats at their trial. Without hesitation Adams' agreed to do so on grounds that it was "right" to provide the accused with a good defense and "wrong" — no matter how politically expedient — to refuse to do so. Would your answer have been the same? Why was it important that the Redcoats receive a fair trial? Why were they not simply turned over to the mob for swift justice at the end of a rope? [Encourage discussion. Point out that the colonists had respect for law and order. They and their leaders would not condone actions that could lead to lawlessness and anarchy.]

John Adams' career of public service cost him years of separation from his beloved wife Abigail, his children, and the family farm in Braintree south of Boston. As a member of the Continental Congress, his hours were long, his problems seemed unending, his pay was scant, and criticism was constant. When sent to Europe on his diplomatic missions, the workload increased, the pay became even more uncertain, and the criticism increased. But through it all, he expressed only one complaint: he was often homesick. He longed to return to his family on the New England farm. The rich court life of France, which Benjamin Franklin so relished, had little appeal for Adams. He preferred the simple virtues of the New World rather than the sophisticated

intrigues of the Old.

Concluding Thought

Much more could be said about the life and accomplishments of John Adams, including the role he played in the Congress that declared independence, his tour of duty in England following the War, and his years as Vice President and President. But such events pale in importance to the diplomatic victories he achieved in England, France, and Holland during the critical years of America's infancy. His honesty, wisdom, candor, and persistence combined to raise the newborn nation from its war-weary knees to its feet, then send it marching toward its destiny. Without Adams' bold and principled statesmanship, it is possible, even likely, that America would have fallen victim to European intrigue and snares.

Looking Ahead

The question of who controlled the western frontiers of America was of great importance during the Revolutionary War and after the peace treaty was signed. Both England and France had forts on the western fringes of the United States, and the English repeatedly sought to stir-up Indian tribes to wage war against "the White man" in the former colonies. Next week we will travel west, to frontier territory, for some of that history.

DURING THE WEEK

Have family members to read more about John Adams' early background and his years as Vice President and President of the United States. Such references books as *John Adams* by John T. Morse, Jr., *John Adams* by Anne Surleigh, and *John Adams* by Page Smith, should be available at most public libraries.

If such additional research is not feasible for your family, discuss Adams' character traits and compare them with those displayed by American political leaders today. Clarify the differences between a "statesman" and a "politician."