

# 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.

**T**HE 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.



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,

