

**A MORE PERFECT UNION:
THE ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENT
OF THE U.S. CONSTITUTION**

North Shore Educational Collaborative

Final Project: John Adams

Harry K. Harutunian

September 22, 2010

Introduction

After spending the summer involved in the program, “A More Perfect Union: The Origins and Development of the U.S. Constitution”, I became extremely interested in the role John Adams played in the early stages of the development of our country. All the books I’ve read through the program, the class discussions, and the field trip to the Adams National Historic Park, sparked a great interest for me to learn more about John Adams, the second president of the United States. All of the materials I reviewed, clearly believe that John Adams, while not forgotten among the Founding Fathers, never received the recognition he deserved in our country’s history.

I also felt a great benefit for my students on doing additional reading about the man from Massachusetts. Over the last four years, I have taught U.S. History II, which covers the period from 1865 to present. This year, for the very first time, I will be teaching U.S. History I, which covers the period from 1607 to 1865. This course, as well as the additional work on John Adams, will enhance my knowledge and presentation for my students in the upcoming school year.

My project involved re-visiting the Adams National Historic Park, listening to the *John Adams*, by David McCullough on CD, watching the HBO mini-series *John Adams* on DVD, and reading the book itself, *John Adams*, by David McCullough.

This paper critiques each of the three resources listed and also incorporates how each of these resources will be used this year in the U.S. History I classroom.

HBO miniseries *John Adams* on DVD, based on the book by David McCullough

After watching and reviewing the nine-hour mini-series *John Adams*, on the life of John Adams, the second President of the United States, it helped to enhance the reading of the book and the listening to the audio version, as to make them both more visual, enjoyable, and easier to comprehend. This HBO mini-series was based on David McCullough's Pulitzer Prize winning book, *John Adams*. Although the mini-series does not cover the entire book, writers, Kirk Ellis and Michelle Ashford, did an outstanding job in piecing together the major themes to bring together an excellent portrayal of John Adams and the book written by David McCullough. The actor, who plays John Adams, Paul Giamatti, was an excellent choice for the role because he physically resembles the real John Adams. In the movie *1776*, which we viewed in class, the actor who portrays John Adams, is very fit and slender, while the real John Adams was actually short and somewhat portly. This choice of Giamatti, allows the students and other viewers to identify with the actor and brings the real John Adams to life and allows the viewer to see the man as he might have appeared in the 1700/1800's. Another aspect of the series was throughout the program, as Adams becomes older, you witness Adams' hair receding and age spots appear on his face and hands, which helps make the series seem more real and come alive.

The mini-series begins with John Adams in 1770, when Adams is asked and agrees to defend British soldiers from murder charges, after they are accused of killing mostly unarmed colonists at what is now referred to in history as the "Boston Massacre."

He does this after defying his fellow Sons of Liberty members, including his trouble making cousin, Samuel Adams, who wants the British soldiers to hang. You watch and hear the beliefs and thoughts that go on as Adams is able to bring forth a defense that convinces the jury that the soldiers were provoked and that the order to fire came from the mob, not the British commander. This victory in the courtroom earns Adams a reputation for courage, respect and shows how strongly he feels about the rights of man, which is a reoccurring theme throughout his life. It also shows how Adams had control of his confidence, which at times was just short of being arrogant.

In general, and by most Americans, John Adams has never been included as one of the great leaders or Founding Fathers of this country's beginnings. Ask any high school student to name the greatest early Americans, and most will name George Washington, Thomas Jefferson or Benjamin Franklin. Few students will mention John Adams.

As the mini-series develops, you begin to see the very close and important relationship between Adams and his wife Abigail, who is played by Laura Linney. The writer's did an excellent job in explaining how important Abigail was indirectly to our nation's history. The series illustrates her charm and determination and how much Adams needed her input. Abigail comes to life from the book and the mini-series as it portrays her as a wise, fierce, loyal, and long-suffering wife, who Adams uses to check his pride, his thoughts, and become his best advisor throughout his life. An example of her insight is that Abigail sees the revolution coming long before Adams.

After the trial, the mini-series follows Adams to Philadelphia, where he is serving as a Massachusetts delegate to the First Continental Congress.

We view the reaction of Adams as the British Parliament passes the Coercive Acts and Adams tirelessly tries to persuade the delegates from the other colonies to support a fight with England, which appears to others as a Massachusetts fight. Here, viewers see Adams frustration as he heads home, defeated from not convincing the members of the First Continental Congress, that they must support independence.

On April 19, 1775, just before Adams is to head back to Philadelphia, shots are fired at Lexington and Concord. We watch as Adams is told the news and races to the site of the battle, and sees the bodies of dead colonists, which affects him greatly. He heads back to Philadelphia and the Second Continental Congress. We watch as Adams argues for independence, and tells of what has happened at Lexington and Concord. Here is where the viewer gets to hear some of the discussions and debates that may have taken place about how our country decided to move forward with independence. It is also here that we learn that Thomas Jefferson was asked to write the Declaration of Independence and John Adams became the voice of the document, and convinces Congress to sign the document. This series does a great job in giving the viewers and students the feeling of being present during the debates, experiencing the frustrations and important role John Adams plays in the Declaration of Independence. In short, the nine hours, seven part mini-series was outstanding and creates an excellent tool for bringing alive the teaching of U.S. History I and meeting the state U.S. History I standards. It is this part of the mini-series that I would use with my students from the beginning of the series right up to Independence, where I feel it would be a strong teaching instrument as well as an introduction for the state U.S. History I Learning Standards 1,2,3,4, and 5 (see attached).

John Adams, by David McCullough on CD, audio version

I purchased the audio version which contained nine CD's and ran nine hours long. I listened to it on my six hour drive up and back to visit my son at Fort Drum, NY. I also listened to the CD's prior to reading the book and after watching the mini-series. Out of the three; the audio version, the DVD, and the book, I found on audio of John Adams to be the most difficult to absorb and at times, very difficult to follow.

The audio version, I believe, can be useful in very small amounts in detailing Adams' life as a boy, delegate, statesmen, President, and his last years of life. The audio is a great listening exercise for students. I thought the ending was excellent as it covered his last years of his life and detailed Adams relationship with Thomas Jefferson.

There are a few parts of the audio that sometimes made it difficult to follow because you could often hear the reader, Mr. Herrmann, breathing through his nose, smacking his lips, or exhaling. Mr. Herrmann is in fact one of my favorite readers, but the background noise was somewhat distracting. It was not a big deal but when all you have is audio and visual, you tend to be easily distracted by the odd sounds like those mentioned. On the upside, listening to the book on tape gave me another tool to use with my students. Certain parts of the audio version I would utilize to help students concentrate, improve their listening skills, and to improve their imagination skills. The attempt would be to have students create in their minds visions of what is going on and then have them articulate their thoughts to the entire class.

Most students are used to having DVD's and videos available to them on almost every subject. This particular audio version would force them to use more of their listening skills. This audio version would also be an excellent teaching instrument for selected sections of teaching U.S. History I and meeting the state U.S. History I Learning Standards 1 -21 (see attached).

John Adams, by David McCullough, the book

David McCullough's book, *John Adams*, is a Pulitzer Prize winning book. From a historical standpoint it's as good as it gets. The quality of research is outstanding. The book is very readable and you don't have to be a historian to understand it.

When historian David McCullough set out to write a book on Adams and Jefferson, initially he feared that Adams would scarcely hold his own against the third President of the United States. Once his research started, and after he read hundreds of letters written between Adams and his wife Abigail, the focus of his book shifted and he decided to write the book solely on John Adams. After reading the book, I can understand why he made this decision. Reading about John Adams, visiting the Adams' National Historic Park, (once with the class and again by myself), and listening to Richard Bernstein, I became very excited about the life of John Adams. I think Adams is vastly underrated and that is why I chose him as my topic for my final paper.

One of things I learned from the book was that the biography of Adams shares a great deal of information about Thomas Jefferson, but on almost every point when comparing the two men, I think McCullough makes a strong argument that Jefferson comes in second on almost everything when compared to Adams.

McCullough does an excellent job in presenting Adams as a descendant of farmers from Braintree, MA, who loved to talk, and always said exactly what was on his mind. He was a person who “never tried to appear as something he was not”. McCullough shows very clearly throughout the book that Adams always remained true to his origins. He points out that Adams was a man “accustomed to pruning his own trees, cutting his own hay, and splitting his own firewood”. In the book, he made a point to show how Abigail, throughout her long life, did her own sewing, baking, fed her own ducks and chickens and churned her own butter.

According to McCullough, Adams contributed more to the early history of the United States than he has been given recognition for and I believe this is explained in his book. In 1776, Adams, according to Thomas Jefferson, wrote “the colossus of independence, a delegate most responsible for the Continental Congress’s adopting independence was John Adams.” Adams, as a diplomat in Europe during the 1780’s, secured a loan from the Dutch without which, according to McCullough, the Revolution might have failed. According to the book, he served as Vice President “with unfailing loyalty to George Washington,” whose administration he supported by casting a still unmatched 31 tie-breaking votes in the Senate.

McCullough feels that Adams, “achieved a rare level of statesmanship,” by beginning peace negotiations with the French, which was very badly needed. He states that Adams was not a wealthy man, but a working farmer. Adams himself, observed in 1777, that he was not wealthy and saying “not.....sufficient to pay a laboring man on a farm.”

His financial welfare depended on his Massachusetts farm, which Abigail managed under very trying circumstances. McCullough states that John Adams doubted historians would ever record the history of the Revolution accurately. McCullough, 175 years after Adams death, felt it was time to give him the recognition he deserved and so he wrote the book

I would definitely utilize this book when teaching the early parts of American History. Each class would start off by reading a section of the book, which would meet the state U.S. History I standards 1 - 21 (see attached).

It is my opinion that the book was an outstanding piece of literature and extremely beneficial to the teachings in any U.S. History class covering the period of 1700-1800.

