

INTRODUCTION TO

THE FOUNDERS ON THE FOUNDERS: WORD

PORTRAITS FROM THE AMERICAN

REVOLUTIONARY ERA

BY JOHN P. KAMINSKI

The Founders were extraordinary individuals--they were not cold statues. The fog of fame and time, however, has obscured them as flesh and blood human beings. Most of us think of them only as a group--the Founders--not as individuals with their own personalities, strengths and weaknesses. Those who do warrant individual attention have become caricatures. How many Americans know the real Washington, Franklin, and Jefferson; let alone Madison, Jay, and Hamilton? Occasionally we have been blessed or cursed with a public television documentary on the life of one or another of these Founders. Often they are filled with almost as many errors as facts.

Before the Revolution most of the Founders pictured their ancestors--not themselves--as special individuals who braved the treacherous trans-Atlantic voyage and the subsequent travails of a hostile new, often unforgiving land. Once the Revolutionary movement was well underway, however, the Founders came to appreciate their own unique place in history. It was their “lot to live in perplexing and eventful times.”¹ John Adams wrote that “I am but an ordinary Man. The Times alone have destined me to Fame.”² Thomas Jefferson believed that “Nature intended me for the tranquil pursuits of science, by rendering them my supreme delight. But the enormities of the times in which I have lived, have forced me to take a part in resisting them, and to commit myself on the boisterous ocean of political passions.”³ Speaking for his contemporaries, Adams wrote that “We of this Generation are destined to Act a painful and a dangerous Part, and We must make the best of our Lot.”⁴

Adams denigrated the “Idea of the *great Men*. . . . It is a great People that does great Things. They will always find Instruments to employ that will answer their Ends.”⁵ While attending the First Continental Congress Adams felt that body’s inadequacy for the difficult times ahead. “We have not Men, fit for the Times. We are deficient in Genius, in Education, in Travel, in Fortune--in every Thing. I feel unutterable Anxiety--God grant us Wisdom, and

¹ John Jay to William Wilberforce, Bedford, N.Y., April 14, 1806, *The Correspondence and Public Papers of John Jay*, ed. by Henry P. Johnston (4 vols., New York, 1890-1893), IV, 308.

² John Adams Diary, April 26, 1779, *Diary and Autobiography of John Adams*, ed. by L. H. Butterfield et al. (4 vols., Cambridge, 1962), II, 362.

³ To P. S. Dupont de Nemours, Washington, March 2, 1809, ed. by John P. Kaminski, *The Quotable Jefferson* (Princeton, N.J., 2006), 75.

⁴ To Edmund Jenings, Nantes, April 13, 1779, *Adams Family Correspondence*, ed. by L. H. Butterfield et al. (Cambridge, Mass., 1963-), *Papers of John Adams*, ed. by Robert J. Taylor et al. (Cambridge, Mass., 1989), VIII, 35.

⁵ Adams to Edmund Jenings, L’Orient, May 22, 1779, *ibid.*, VIII, 68.

Fortitude!”⁶ Three months later Adams’s significantly elevated his opinion. “There is in the Congress a Collection of the greatest Men upon this Continent, in Point of Abilities, Virtues and Fortunes. The Magnanimity, and public Spirit, which I see here, makes me blush for the sordid venal Herd, which I have seen in my own Province.”⁷ Increasingly, however, he felt “that every great Character in the World is a Bubble and an Imposture.”⁸ In outlining what he felt was the ideal form for a state constitution, Adams advocated annual elections for all offices and a mandatory limit of three years in any one office. This would teach “the great political virtue of humility, patience, and moderation, without which every man in power becomes a ravenous beast of prey.” Thus the great men

“Like bubbles on the sea of matter borne,

They rise, they break, and to that sea return.”⁹

What does seem to separate the Founders from others is a remarkable sense of duty. According to John Jay, “Personal considerations . . . must give way to public ones, and the consciousness of having done our duty to our country and posterity, must recompense us for all the evils we experience in their cause.”¹⁰ When about ready to leave his family in New York to travel abroad for at least a year on a diplomatic mission to London, Chief Justice Jay wrote his wife, “I feel the impulse of duty strongly.”¹¹ In accepting the appointment as commander-in-

⁶ John Adams, *Diary*, Philadelphia, June 25, 1774, Vol. II, 97.

⁷ John Adams to Abigail Adams, Philadelphia, September 8, 1774, *Adams Family Correspondence*, I, 150.

⁸ Adams to Edmund Jenings, L’Orient, May 22, 1779, *Papers of John Adams*, VIII, 68.

⁹ John Adams, *Thoughts on Government* . . . (Philadelphia, 1776), *ibid.*, IV, 90. Adams quoted the couplet from Alexander Pope’s *Essay on Man* (London, 1758), Epistle III, lines 19-20.

¹⁰ To Egbert Benson, Aranjuez, June 1780, Johnston, *Jay*, I, 363.

¹¹ To Sarah Jay, Philadelphia, April 15, 1794, *ibid.*, IV, 3.

chief in 1775, George Washington explained to his wife that “it was utterly out of my power to refuse this appointment without exposing my Character to such censures as would have reflected dishonor upon myself and given pain to my friends.” To decline the appointment, Washington told Martha, would “have lessen’d me considerably in my own esteem.”¹² At the depths of the Revolution, Washington confidently wrote that “There is one reward that nothing can deprive me of, and that is the consciousness of having done my duty with the strictest rectitude and most scrupulous exactness.” Toward the end of his presidency, Washington wrote that no amount of lies or censure “shall make me swerve from what I conceive to be the strict line of my duty.”¹³ Happily retired, Washington could proudly state that “My whole life has been dedicated to the service of my country in one shape or another.”¹⁴ Fifteen years after his death, Washington was described as having

the singular destiny and merit, of leading the armies of his country successfully through an arduous war, for the establishment of its independence; of conducting its councils through the birth of a government, new in its forms and principles, until it had settled down into a quiet and orderly train; and of scrupulously obeying the laws through the whole of his career, civil and military, of which the history of the world furnishes no other example.¹⁵

¹² Philadelphia June 18, 1775, *The Papers of George Washington*, ed. by Donald Jackson (Charlottesville, Va., 1976-), Rev. Series, I, 3-4.

¹³ To Lund Washington, Morristown, N.J., May 19, 1780, and to John Eager Howard, Philadelphia, November 30, 1795, quoted in *The Quotable George Washington: The Wisdom of an American Patriot*, ed. and comp. by Stephen E. Lucas (Madison, Wis., 1999), 27, 28.

¹⁴ To James McHenry, Mount Vernon, July 4, 1798, *ibid.*, 79.

¹⁵ Thomas Jefferson to Walter Jones, Monticello, January 2, 1814, *The Quotable Jefferson*, 438.

Anticipating the presidency, John Adams told his wife that “if the Fates destine one to attempt it, it would be dastardly to shrink if it were in one’s Power.”¹⁶ Fifteen years later, a seventy-six-year old Adams said that he “was borne along by an irresistible sense of duty.”¹⁷

One of the most remarkable characteristics of the Founding generation was the ferocity with which they defended their traditional rights as Englishmen. The British were taken aback by the American hostility to acts of Parliament, but so too were many Americans like Benjamin Franklin, John Jay, John Dickinson, James Duane, and Thomas Hutchinson fearful of this flagrant disrespect for Parliamentary authority. Many of these colonists became reluctant revolutionaries; others remained loyal to the Crown.

The Founders responded steadfastly to Britain’s new imperial policy implemented after the French and Indian War--a policy described by John Adams as “Innovations and illegal Encroachments”¹⁸ and by George Washington as a policy “to overthrow our Constitutional Rights & liberties.”¹⁹ This new policy provoked a constitutional crisis in defense of common-law rights as defined by a century and a half of colonial experience. Thomas Paine wrote that “When we speak of right we ought always to unite it with the idea of duties: rights become duties by reciprocity. The right which I enjoy becomes my duty to guarantee it to another, and he to me; and those who violate the duty justly incur a forfeiture of the right.”²⁰ Paine believed that there

¹⁶ To Abigail Adams, Philadelphia, February 6, 1796, Adams Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

¹⁷ Adams to Benjamin Rush, August 28, 1811, *The Spur of Fame; Dialogues of John Adams and Benjamin Rush, 1805-1813*, ed. by John A. Schutz and Douglass Adair (San Marino, Calif., 1966), 207.

¹⁸ John Adams to the Comte de Vergennes, Passy, February 11, 1779, *Papers of John Adams*, VII, 402.

¹⁹ To Bryan Fairfax, Mount Vernon, July 20, 1774, *GW Papers*, Colonial Series, X, 129-30.

²⁰ *Dissertation on First Principles of Government* (1795), quoted in John P. Kaminski, comp. & ed., *Citizen Paine: Thomas Paine’s Thoughts on Man, Government, Society, and Religion* (Lanham, Md., 2002), 86.

were three types of men in every state--“the willing and able, the willing and not able, and the able and *not* willing.”²¹

Addressing the freemen of America during the election of the first Congress under the Constitution, “Native American” also suggested that

Men of talents divide themselves into three classes. The first of which, are those who make a proper use of their talents, when they do so, they exhibit to us examples of the highest virtue and truest piety. The second class, are those who misapply their talents, instead of being the protectors of mankind, they are their worst enemies: then, they commit a most sacrilegious breach of trust, and, as far as in them lies, defeat the designs of providence. This is the greatest of all crimes, and is attended with the worst consequences. The third class, are those who make no use of their talents; these are not so highly culpable as those who misapply their talents—but, as talents are the gift of the Almighty, for the benefit of mankind, he, who makes no use of them is guilty of a crime. ²²

Men of talents were easily discoverable in every community.

The good man may be known by his modesty. He courts not praise nor a great name—his desire is to be useful to mankind—he exerts himself for their benefit—his acts are dictated by virtue—they are steady and uniform—the applause of his own conscience, is his best reward—he believes the first duty of men, next to that of worshipping the deity, is ministering to the

²¹ *Serious Address to the People of Pennsylvania* (1778), quoted in *Citizen Paine*, 233.

²² *New York Daily Advertiser*, October 6, 1788, Merrill Jensen et al., eds. *The Documentary History of the First Federal Elections, 1788-1790* (4 vols., Madison, Wis., 1976-1989), III, 204.

wants of his fellow-creatures.—Disinterestedness, benevolence, probity, charity, fortitude, and perseverance, are exhibited on all proper occasions—industry and application, carries him to the summit of attainable knowledge—bring him forward into public life—his good qualities do not forsake him—he becomes the guardian angel of his country.—Watchful to avert the most distant evil, and to maintain, or procure good order, due obedience to the laws—peace, plenty—he believes that the true end of government is not to deprive mankind of their natural liberty, but to regulate their conduct, so as to attain the supreme good of the whole—for which purpose, he is ever anxious so to balance the government, that neither tyranny nor licentiousness shall prevail.²³

These are the kinds of men who should be elected to public office. On the eve of the Revolution, Connecticut Congressman Oliver Wolcott said it was the duty of all members of Congress to protect the constitutions of their colonies. “Experience, Nature’s sure hand maid, will guide us right. . . . We shall do our Duty.”²⁴

In July 1776 representatives from all thirteen mainland colonies assembled in Congress declared their independence from the mightiest nation in the world knowing full well the danger for themselves and their families. Independence, if achievable at all, would come only with great sacrifice. By the end of 1781 these remarkable men and women had torn down an empire and constructed a federal union and thirteen individual state governments. They and European

²³ Ibid., 204-5.

²⁴ Wolcott to Samuel Lyman, Philadelphia, April 17, 1776, *Letters of Delegates to Congress, 1774-1789*, ed. by Paul H. Smith (26 vols., Washington, D.C., 1976-2000), III, 553.

observers quite consciously felt that they constituted a laboratory for a new kind of republican government.

Not all of the Founders agreed on the kind of government to adopt. John Adams and Thomas Paine, for instance, advocated opposite points of view and each feared the irrevocable damage to be done if the other's plan of government were adopted. Adams explained that Paine's "plan was so democratical, without any restraint or even an Attempt at any Equilibrium or Counterpoise, that it must produce confusion and every Evil Work." After Adams published his own outline for the new state constitutions in a pamphlet entitled *Thoughts on Government*, Paine confronted him saying that "it would do hurt, and that it was repugnant to the plan he had proposed in his [pamphlet] *Common Sense*." Adams responded to Paine that "it was true it was repugnant and for that reason, I had written it and consented to the publication of it: for I was as much afraid of his Work as he was of mine."²⁵ Although never really friends, both men came to despise each other. Paine wrote of Adams: "It has been the political career of this man to begin with hypocrisy, proceed with arrogance, and finish in contempt. May such be the fate of all such characters."²⁶ Adams, on the other hand, described Paine as "a Mongrel between Pigg and Puppy, begotten by a wild Boar on a Bitch Wolf" who had "a Career of Mischief."²⁷

When the American experiments in republicanism seemed to have failed, the Founders, in 1787-1789, drafted, ratified, and implemented a new federal Constitution that would create a powerful, energetic national government. Two years later they tempered that strong Constitution with the Bill of Rights. Over the next generation, one state after another revised their own constitutions bringing them into alignment with the federal Constitution. Adams pointed to the

²⁵ John Adams, *Autobiography*, III, 333.

²⁶ Thomas Paine: To the Citizens of the *National Intelligencer*, November 22, 1802.

²⁷ See below under Thomas Paine.

experience of others who had faced similar crises: “It is much easier to pull down a Government, in such a Conjunction of affairs as We have seen, than to build up.”²⁸

Many of the Founders believed they had God’s blessing and assistance in their struggle, but even the most religious among them felt that “Providence seldom interposes in human affairs but through the agency of human means.”²⁹ Independence and good government would not be divine gifts miraculously bestowed upon Americans. “Human and natural means” must be used to create governments that would effectively serve mankind.³⁰ Thus, Americans would have to convince God and the world that they deserved independence. It was a small band of fewer than 500,000 men sparsely settled along a thin ribbon of unprotected Atlantic Coast that would have to stand up against the mightiest navy in the world, against an experienced well-disciplined army that had a decade before defeated the powerful armies of France and Spain, against thousands of German mercenaries hired by George III, against most of the Indian tribes on their flanks who believed that the colonists could not defeat the British, against at least a third of their own people who remained loyal to the Crown, and against perhaps another third of Americans who were apathetic, pacifistic or unwilling to take sides.³¹

Within each colony, a small group of men led the anti-British movement. Political factions existed in every colony with local issues predominating. Often the determining factor in

²⁸ John Adams to James Warren, London, January 9, 1787, *Warren-Adams Letters: Being Chiefly a Correspondence Among John Adams, Samuel Adams, and James Warren* (2 vols., Boston, 1917 and 1925), II, 281.

²⁹ John Jay to Richard Peters, Bedford, N.Y., March 29, 1811, Johnston, *Jay*, IV, 351.

³⁰ John Adams to Benjamin Rush, New York, July 24, 1789, *Documentary History of the First Federal Congress of the United States of America*, ed. by Charlene Bangs Bickford et al. (Baltimore, 1972-), XVI, 1125.

³¹ The number 500,000 adult white men is derived starting with about 3 million people in America in 1776. About 650,000 were African-American slaves. Only about 20 percent of the remaining population was adult white men. Much of the population consisted of children with ten or more children per family not being unusual. Of the 500,000 men not more than half favored independence in July 1776.

whether one faction was pro- or anti-British was only which faction happened to be in power at the time. Had the Delanceys been out of power in colonial New York when the final crisis loomed, perhaps they would have been the Patriots, while the Livingstons would have remained loyal. Many of these factions continued and new ones formed and sub-divided during and after the war.

Within states, factions often developed based on the personalities of their leaders, on religious differences, or sectional and economic issues. In Virginia the supporters of Thomas Jefferson vied with the supporters of Patrick Henry. In New York Philip Schuyler and his son-in-law Alexander Hamilton came to loathe their former ally Governor George Clinton, a man they felt was by “family and connections” not entitled to “so distinguished a predominance.”³² The governor returned the antipathy for the aristocratic Schuyler and his shirt-tail clinging son-in-law. In Massachusetts various leaders despised the immensely popular demagogic John Hancock, whom Abigail Adams described as “the tinkeling cymball.”³³ Similarly the uncouth Samuel Chase of Maryland and the democratic Abraham Clark of New Jersey were hated and feared by conservatives, while in Delaware democrats detested the aristocratic George Read. In Pennsylvania the Constitutionalists and the Republicans battled for a decade and a half over the state’s extremely democratic constitution of 1776. Before the adoption of this constitution inspired by Thomas Paine, Pennsylvania politics had fixated on the interminable conflict between the colony’s Quakers and Presbyterians. Political conflicts within the states seemed ever present as opposing forces challenged each other annually in state and local elections.

³² Philip Schuyler to John Jay, 14 July 1777, Johnston, *Jay*, I, 146-47.

³³ To John Adams, July 5, 1780, *Adams Family Correspondence*, III, 372.

Local leaders were elected to provincial legislatures, which in turn selected leaders to represent them in Congress meeting in Philadelphia. “Habituated to lead and guide” in their own colonies, many members of Congress vied for leadership roles on the continental stage, while others were content to follow.³⁴ Posturing occurred in Congress on the most minute matters. Adams styled it “nibbling and quibbling.” “There is no greater Mortification than to sit with half a dozen Witts, deliberating upon a Petition, Address, or Memorial. These great Witts, these subtle Criticks, these refined Genius’s, these learned Lawyers, these wise Statesmen, are so fond of showing their Parts and Powers, as to make their Consultations very tedious.”³⁵ Jefferson would later agree. “Procrastination is unavoidable. How can expedition be expected from a body which we have saddled with an hundred lawyers, whose trade is talking?”³⁶

Coalition-building occurred in Congress. New Englanders and Southerners often lived apart from each other in different boarding houses. “The Southern interest, or the Northern; and every man of them ranges himself upon one side or the other, and contends with as much earnestness and warmth as if at an Olympic game.”³⁷ “To people, out of doors, there appears to be the most shameful *party spirit* in that august body—perpetual jarrings—no convictions, nor conciliating temper.”³⁸ Occasionally, however, sectional differences became secondary to personal conflicts. The Lee-Adams Junto connected the democratic cousins John and Samuel Adams of Massachusetts and their supporters with the aristocratic brothers Arthur and Richard

³⁴ John Adams, *Diary*, Philadelphia, October 10, 1774, Vol. II, 150.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, October 24, 1774, Vol. II, 156.

³⁶ Jefferson to Thomas Leiper, Monticello, June 12, 1815, *The Quotable Jefferson*, 150-51.

³⁷ Thomas B. Wait to George Thatcher, Portland, Maine, August 21, 1788, *First Federal Elections*, I, 95.

³⁸ “Extract of a Letter from New York, 5 September,” printed in the *Litchfield Weekly Monitor*, September 15, 1788, *ibid.*, 122-23.

Henry Lee of Virginia and their supporters. The Lee-Adams Junto vehemently opposed middle state leaders such as Benjamin Franklin and Robert Morris of Pennsylvania. It was the anomalous Thomas Paine who could attack Morris and his backers in 1778 and yet four years later find himself secretly employed by Superintendent of Finance Morris in writing propaganda for the army and for Congress, and in 1785 supporting Morris in Pennsylvania politics.

Foreign affiliations played a key role in coalition-building. Those with strong ties toward France bonded together and opposed those wanting to reestablish close political and economic relations with Great Britain. John Jay became a close friend of John Adams as they negotiated the peace treaty with Great Britain in Paris in 1782-1783, while they both drifted apart from their fellow peace commissioner Benjamin Franklin. Jay and Adams came to have deep suspicions of the French, while Franklin loved and was loved by the French. Adams came to view Franklin as “a Man of Artifice and Duplicity, of Ambition and Vanity, of Jealousy and Envy”; while Franklin believed that Adams “means well for his Country, is always an honest Man, often a wise one, but sometimes, and in some things, absolutely out of his senses.”³⁹ Perhaps, Franklin thought, a physiological problem existed that caused “a Disorder in the Brain, which, though not constant, has its Fits too frequent.”⁴⁰

Many men elected to the Continental and Confederation congresses had never been outside of their state before, and virtually all of them shared in the animosities that inhabitants of one state felt for people in other states. New Englanders hated New Yorkers and visa versa. Pennsylvanians and Virginians had fought over western lands. Southerners were wary of

³⁹ John Adams to James Warren, Paris, April 13, 1783, *Warren-Adams Letters*, II, 210; and Benjamin Franklin to Secretary for Foreign Affairs Robert R. Livingston, Passy, July 22, 1783, *Benjamin Franklin: Writings*, ed. by J. A. Leo Lemay (New York, 1987), 1065.

⁴⁰ Franklin to Robert Morris, Passy, December 25, 1783, E. James Ferguson et al., eds., *The Papers of Robert Morris, 1781-1784* (9 vols., Pittsburgh, 1973-1999), VIII, 839.

grasping New England Yankees who always tried to turn an exorbitant profit through shipping Southern staples or importing slaves. Even within states, Americans often did not care for each other as the entrenched coastal establishments withheld legislative representation and costly government services and institutions from the burgeoning backcountry settlements. Separatist movements smoldered in at least half of the states and eventually ignited into civil wars in Vermont, North and South Carolina, and Pennsylvania. It was the Crown that had previously cemented the colonies together. Increasingly after the war, the idea of separate confederacies surfaced, but most Americans sensed the importance of the Union.

With Americans thrust together on the continental scene, forced to address important issues affecting the interests of both individual states as well as the country, it became imperative for politicians to understand each other. John Adams wrote to William Tudor that “We live in Times, when it is necessary to look about Us, and to know the Character of every Man, who is concerned in any material Branch of public affairs.”⁴¹ Three months later, Adams wrote to his close friend James Warren about the importance of understanding the character of their fellow politicians.

When it is Said that it is the Prerogative of omniscience to Search
Hearts, I Suppose it is meant that no human sagacity can penetrate at all
Times into Men’s Bosoms and discover with precise Certainty the secrets
there: and in this Sense it is certainly true.

But there is a Sense in which Men may be said to be possessed of a
Faculty of Searching Hearts too. There is a Discernment competent to
Mortals by which they can penetrate into the Minds of Men and discover
their Secret Passions, Prejudices, Habits, Hopes, Fears, Wishes and

⁴¹ John Adams to William Tudor, Philadelphia, July 23, 1775, *Papers of John Adams*, III, 85.

Designs, and by this Means judge what Part they will act in given Circumstances for the future, and see what Principles and Motives have actuated them to the Conduct they have held, in certain Conjunctions of Circumstances which are passed.

A Dexterity and Facility of thus unraveling Men's Thought and a Faculty of governing them by Means of the Knowledge We have of them, constitutes the principal Part of the Art of a Politician.

Adams felt that in a local legislature, "where We know a Man's Pedigree and Biography, his Education, Profession and Connections, as well as his Fortune," it would be relatively "easy to see what it is that governs a Man and determines him to this Party in Preference to that, to this system of Politics rather than another." But in a continental congress it was different; it was harder. "It requires Time to enquire and learn the Characters and Connections, the Interests and Views of a Multitude of Strangers" to unravel what Adams called the "Mystery of Politics."⁴² Despite the importance given the subject by Adams, Jefferson felt that Adams was "a bad calculator of the force and probable effect of the motives which govern men."⁴³

Jefferson too felt the importance of discerning the character of members of Congress. He told James Madison, who had just returned to Congress after a three-year absence required by the mandatory rotation-in-office provision of the Articles of Confederation, that he would send him some character sketches of members of Congress. "It will become of importance that you should form a just estimate of certain public characters; on which therefore I will give you such notes as

⁴² John Adams to James Warren, October 24, 1775, *ibid.*, III, 239.

⁴³ Jefferson to James Madison, Paris, January 30, 1787, *The Papers of James Madison*, ed. by Robert A. Rutland et al. (Chicago, 1975), IX, 249.

my knowledge of them has furnished me with. You will compare them with the materials you are otherwise possessed of, and decide on a view of the whole.”⁴⁴

Alexander Hamilton always searched for the political affiliations of his colleagues. “I have ever condemned those cold, unfeeling hearts, which no object can animate. I condemn those indifferent mortals, who either never form opinions, or never make them known.”⁴⁵ John Adams agreed that “Silence is most commonly design and intrigue.”⁴⁶ The intriguer, who used duplicity and machinations to “the road to preferment,”⁴⁷ was to be despised and guarded against. Perhaps worse was the trimmer, who “in politicks is every way contemptible, and ought never to be trusted. He will certainly *always* be ready to betray you when he conceives that he can serve himself by doing so.”⁴⁸ But conversations in Congress with trusted friends “constituted feasts of noble sentiments.”⁴⁹

It was imperative to study the classics of ancient Greece and Rome, the histories of these times, and perhaps of most importance the biographies in Plutarch’s *Lives*. Every example of human nature from greed to honor could be found in these works. The Founders believed that “Human nature is the same in all Ages--Habits & Manners vary.”⁵⁰ If they could identify and

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Hamilton’s speech in the New York Ratifying Convention, June 28, 1788, John P. Kaminski et al., eds., *The Documentatry History of the Ratification of the Constitution* (Madison, Wis., 2007), XXII.

⁴⁶ Adams to Benjamin Rush, September 9, 1806,

⁴⁷ Elbridge Gerry to James Warren, New York, March 22, 1789,

⁴⁸ “An Inhabitant,” Maryland Journal, December 26, 1788, *First Federal Elections*, II, 163.

⁴⁹ Benjamin Rush: “Travels through Life,” George W. Corner, ed., *The Autobiography of Benjamin Rush* . . . (Princeton, N.J., 1948), 111.

⁵⁰ Peter Van Schaack to Henry C. Van Schaack, Kinderhook, N.Y., June 29, 1788, John P. Kaminski et al., eds., *The Documentary History of the Ratification of the Constitution: Ratification of the Constitution by the States, New York* (20 vols. to date, Madison, Wis., 2007), XXI, 1239.

compare individuals in their own society with similar types of personalities in ancient Greece and Rome, they could better predict how their contemporaries would act.

John Adams praised his wife's "skill in Physiognomy, and your Talent at drawing Characters,"⁵¹ and Abigail instructed her son not to be "a superficial observer, but study Men and Manners that you may be Skillful in both."⁵² John Quincy Adams found this hard to do. "To judge Character with impartiality is by no means an easy task. Affection or Resentment will almost always misrepresent things. These passions are the Jaundice of the mind, for they show everything of the same color."⁵³

Character sketches were not only useful, they were entertaining. Abigail Adams admonished her close friend Mercy Otis Warren to "fulfill your promise of writing me a long Letter. . . . I love characters drawn by your pen."⁵⁴ Abigail's husband also wrote Warren that "The Characters drawn in your last entertained me very agreeably. They were taken off, by a nice & penetrating Eye. I hope you will favor me with more of these Characters. I wish I could draw a Number of Characters for your Inspection. I should perhaps daub on the Paint too thick-- but the Features would be very strong."⁵⁵ Similarly, John Adams wrote to James Warren, Mercy's husband, saying "I am vastly obliged to you for your Letter. It was like cold Water to a thirsty Soul."⁵⁶

⁵¹ John Adams to Abigail Adams, Philadelphia, November 18, 1775, *Adams Family Correspondence*, I, 327.

⁵² Abigail Adams to John Quincy Adams, Braintree, January 21, 1781, *ibid.*, IV, 68.

⁵³ John Quincy Adams, Diary, December 8, 1785, *Diary of John Quincy Adams*, ed. by David Grayson Allen et al. (Cambridge, Mass., 1981), I, 368.

⁵⁴ Abigail Adams to Mercy Otis Warren, Braintree, April 13, 1776, *Adams Family Correspondence*, I, 378.

⁵⁵ John Adams to Mercy Otis Warren, Philadelphia, November 25, 1775, *Papers of John Adams*, III, 319.

⁵⁶ Adams to James Warren, Philadelphia, May 21, 1775, *ibid.*, III, 11.

Given the uncertainty of the mail, most correspondents were less than completely candid. John Adams wrote James Warren “We cannot be too cautious I find what We write, whom We write to, and how it is conveyed.”⁵⁷ During the war, the British on various occasions seized American mail and published letters that embarrassed authors. Adams told Warren “I wish I could give a Loose to my Pencil and draw Characters for your Inspection, by the Dozen. But Letters don’t always go safe.”⁵⁸ After some letters to her were “kid Napt” by the enemy, Abigail Adams wrote that her husband, “made wise by experience is so wary that I dare say, they will get no Booty in politicks from him.” Benjamin Rush wasn’t so lucky. The British announced that they intended to print an intercepted letter in which Rush “treats the Rebel Senate with great freedom.”⁵⁹ Each letter was viewed as a child of chance.⁶⁰ After the war, opening other people’s mail continued “to be a very fashionable Vice.”⁶¹

Diplomats serving abroad understood that their mail was furtively read by foreign government officials. John Jay, serving as American minister-designate to Spain, warned a correspondent that “Whenever you write to me, which I hope will be often, recollect that your letters will, in nine instances out of ten, be inspected before they reach me; write nothing, therefore, that you would wish concealed.”⁶² Jay complained to Secretary of Congress Charles Thomson that

⁵⁷ Adams to James Warren, Philadelphia, February 11, 1776, *ibid.*, IV, 21.

⁵⁸ Adams to James Warren, Philadelphia, October 25, 1775, *ibid.*, III, 245.

⁵⁹ Abigail Adams to Mercy Otis Warren, January 8, 1781, *Adams Family Correspondence*, IV, 60.

⁶⁰ Abigail Adams to John Adams, September 15, 1776, *Adams Family Correspondence*, II, 125.

⁶¹ Leonard Gansevoort to Peter Gansevoort, New York, March 5, 1788, Gansevoort-Lansing Papers, New York Public Library.

⁶² Jay to William Bingham, San Ildefonso, September 8, 1781, Johnston, *Jay*, II, 68.

The Want of a regular and safe Communication between Congress and their foreign Ministers, gives occasion to various Inconveniences. Every Letter known or suspected to be for or from me that gets into the post offices, is opened, often kept back for a while and to my certain Knowledge sometimes suppressed entirely. . . . The Expense of private Couriers is intolerable, nor can many in that Character be found who merit Confidence.⁶³

Thomas Jefferson, U.S. minister to France, described

The infidelities of the post offices both of England and France. . . . The former is the most rascally because they retain one's letters, not choosing to take the trouble of copying them. The latter when they have taken copies, are so civil as to send the originals, re-sealed clumsily with a composition on which they have previously taken the impression of the seal.⁶⁴

The Founders understood the serious consequences of misreading men's characters. John Jay cautioned that

men should be well acquainted with a character before they attempt to describe it. Much injustice is often done by taking reports as facts, and forming opinions of men from the suggestions which may arise from envy or interested partialities. Though not very old, I have lived too long to credit

⁶³ Jay to Charles Thomson, Madrid, April 23, 1781, *John Jay: The Winning of the Peace, Unpublished Papers 1780-1784*, ed. by Richard B. Morris (New York, 1980), II, 69.

⁶⁴ Jefferson to Ralph Izard, Paris, September 26, 1785, *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. by Julian P. Boyd et al. (Princeton, N.J., 1950-), VIII, 552-53.

all I hear; and having been deceived by fair as well as unpromising appearances, they have ceased to decide my judgment of men.⁶⁵

Alternatively Jay felt that “To see things as being what they are, to estimate them aright, and to act accordingly, are of all attainments the most important.”⁶⁶ He made “it a Rule to think well of a man as long as I can.”⁶⁷ Thomas Paine believed that “Characters are tender and valuable things; they are more than life to a man of sensibility, and are not to be made the sport of interest, or the sacrifice of incendiary malice.”⁶⁸ President Thomas Jefferson assured Governor George Clinton not to worry about false accusations by a political opponent. “The uniform tenor of a man’s life furnishes better evidence of what he has said or done on any particular occasion than the word of any enemy.”⁶⁹ It was important, Jefferson believed, to get as many opinions as possible before making a final judgment. “Multiplied testimony, multiplied views will be necessary to give solid establishment to truth. Much is known to one which is not known to another, and no one knows everything. It is the sum of individual knowledge which is to make up the whole truth, and to give its correct current through future time.”⁷⁰

Senator William Plumer of New Hampshire realized that he had drawn incorrect conclusions about President Jefferson. “The more critically & impartially I examine the character & conduct of Mr. Jefferson the more favorably I think of his integrity. I am really inclined to

⁶⁵ To William Bingham, St. Ildefonso, September 8, 1781, Johnston, *Jay*, II, 67-68.

⁶⁶ To Lindley Murray, London, August 22, 1794, Johnston, *Jay*, IV, 51.

⁶⁷ Jay to Alexander Hamilton, Albany, November 10, 1798, *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, ed. by Harold C. Syrett (27 vols., New York, 1961-1987), XXII, 234.

⁶⁸ *Pennsylvania Packet*, December 31, 1778.

⁶⁹ Thomas Jefferson to George Clinton, Washington, December 31, 1803, Jefferson Papers, Library of Congress.

⁷⁰ Jefferson to William Johnson, Monticello, March 4, 1823, *ibid.*

think I have done him injustice in not allowing him more credit for the integrity of heart that he possesses.” It was important to gather perceptions from different people and at different times. “A city appears very different when viewed from different positions--& so it is with man. Viewed in different situations--different times--places--circumstances--relations & with different dispositions, the man thus examined appears unlike himself.” Plumer’s object he said “is truth--I write for myself--I wish not--I am determined not--to set down ought in malice, or to diminish anything from the fact.”⁷¹

Throughout their public careers, many of the Founders employed the same moral compass to plot America’s course that they applied in directing their personal lives. Despite the actions of other nations, America would fulfill its destiny only if it were true to the moral imperatives set by God. Success for both men and nations depended upon following a strict code of conduct and a well-balanced system of order. Americans drew upon Alexander Pope, the great English poet (1688-1744) who praised “order and regularity” as “Heaven’s first Law.”⁷² John Jay felt

that nations and individuals injure their essential interests in proportion as they deviate from order. By order I mean that natural regularity which results from attention and obedience to those rules and principles of conduct which reason indicates and which morality and wisdom prescribe. Those rules and principles reach every station and condition in which individuals can be placed, and

⁷¹ William Plumer: Memorandum, March 16, 1806, *William Plumer’s Memorandum of Proceedings in the United States Senate, 1803-1807*, ed. by Everett Somerville Brown (New York, 1923), 453.

⁷² Jeremiah Hill to George Thatcher, Biddeford, Maine, March 4, 1789, *Documentary History of the First Federal Congress*, XV, 10.

extend to every possible situation in which nations can find themselves.⁷³

For the American Revolution to succeed, America and Americans had to make themselves worthy. A whole series of character traits had to be inculcated by individuals and public officials in their personal and official lives. Honesty, morality, integrity, trustworthiness, patriotism, duty, industriousness, dedication, candidness, reserve, prudence, strength, and a resignation to God's will were but a few necessary traits. Americans saw the character flaws in the public officials of other countries and how these personal failings adversely affected their countries. Service abroad had shown John Jay the consequences when men and nations failed to live up to proper "rules and principles of conduct." Spain was perhaps the best example of national degeneration. "This Government has little Money, less Wisdom, no Credit, nor any Right to it. They have Pride without Dignity, Cunning without Policy, Nobility without Honor."⁷⁴ Great Britain, on the other hand, according to Thomas Jefferson, since the accession of George III to the throne in 1760, had been ruled nine times out of ten by "passion, and not reason." Many Americans felt that the entire British government and economy was totally corrupted and ruled by special interests. Consequently, the way to predict what the British would do during the war was to determine what they should do, and then be prepared for the opposite. The British seldom let Americans down.⁷⁵ Thomas Paine agreed. "On our part, in order to know, at any time, what the British government will do, we have only to find out what they ought NOT

⁷³ Charge to the Grand Jury, Richmond, Va., May 22, 1793, Johnston, *Jay*, III, 478.

⁷⁴ To Gouverneur Morris, St. Ildefonso, Spain, September 28, 1781, *The Emerging Nation: A Documentary History of the Foreign Relations of the United States under the Articles of Confederation, 1780-1789*, ed. by Mary A. Giunta (3 vols., Washington, D.C., 1996), I, 238.

⁷⁵ Jefferson to John Adams, Paris, September 28, 1787 and Jefferson to John Jay, Paris, October 8, 1787, Boyd, *Jefferson Papers*, XII, 190, 216.

to do, and this last will be their conduct.” Paine acknowledged “That a country has a right to be as foolish as it pleases.” Britain had proved the practice for many years.⁷⁶ To avoid a similar fate, American leaders would have to have a strength of character both in their personal and public lives.

Not everyone agreed that the British were all inept. The Marquis de Lafayette commanded the American forces in Virginia in 1781. More than fearful of the sheer numbers against him, Lafayette really feared Cornwallis’s abilities. “This devil Cornwallis is much wiser than the other generals with whom I have dealt. He inspires me with a sincere fear, and his name has greatly troubled my sleep. This campaign is a good school for me. God grant that the public does not pay for my lessons.”⁷⁷ To the French minister Luzerne, Lafayette wrote that “I would rather be rid of Lord Cornwallis than of a third of his army. He showers me with courtesies, and we wage war like gentlemen; indeed, he is the only gentleman to have commanded the British in America. But after all this, in the end he will give me a thrashing. . . . Fortune will grow tired of protecting us, and when I am quite alone, I shall be beaten.”⁷⁸ To his close friend General Henry Knox, Washington’s commander of artillery, Lafayette wrote that “Lord Cornwallis’s Abilities are to me more Alarming than his Superiority of forces. I ever had a Great opinion of Him. Our Papers Call Him a Mad man but was ever any Advantage taken of Him where He commanded in Person? To Speak Plain English, I am Devilish Affraid of Him.” Lafayette told Knox that during the 1780 campaign “I was Sighing for Opportunities. This Campaign I was trembling for them,

⁷⁶ Quoted in *Citizen Paine: Thomas Paine’s Thoughts on Man, Government, Society, and Religion*, ed. by John P. Kaminski (Lanham, Md., 2002), 54.

⁷⁷ Lafayette to the Vicomte de Noailles, Williamsburg, July 9, 1781, Stanley J. Idzerda et al., eds., *Lafayette in the Age of the American Revolution: Selected Letters and Papers, 1776-1790* (5 vols., Ithaca, N.Y., 1977-83), IV, 241.

⁷⁸ Montok Hill, August 14, 1781, *ibid.*, 322.

as in the Begining there was no difference between a Scarmish and a Battle, a Battle and a total Defeat. We were so lucky as to Escape an Action, and keep ourselves Clear of that Mounted World that was Galloping Around us.”⁷⁹

The Founders did not agree on what was the most important character trait. John Adams felt that morals were more important than all the “arts, sciences, and literature.”⁸⁰ But Adams and many others believed that “Prudence is the first of virtues and the root of all others. Without prudence there may be abstinence but not temperance; there may be rashness but not fortitude; there may be insensibility or obstinacy but not patience.” Adams contrasted prudence with levity, which buoys individuals uncontrollably to heights beyond rational limits. Hamilton and Burr and thousands of others possessed this sense of levity.⁸¹ Benjamin Rush disagreed with the importance of prudence. He told Adams that General Charles Lee referred to prudence as “a rascally virtue.” Rush felt that prudence “certainly has more counterfeits than any other virtue, and when *real* it partakes very much of a selfish nature. It was prudence that made large property holders become Loyalists during the Revolution. Prudence “never achieved anything great in human affairs.” Martin Luther lacked prudence as did William Harvey. So too did the Adamses and John Hancock. “In private life what is commonly called prudence is little else than a system of self-love.”⁸²

Adams responded immediately. When General Lee characterized prudence as “a rascally virtue,” he confused terms. Lee “meant the spirit which evades when duty requires us to face it. This is cowardice, not prudence; or he meant that subtlety which consults private interest, ease,

⁷⁹ Forks of the York River, August 18, 1781, *ibid.*, 332.

⁸⁰ Adams to Benjamin Rush, November 11, 1806, *Spur of Fame*, 73.

⁸¹ Adams to Benjamin Rush, April 12, 1807, *ibid.*, 84-85.

⁸² Rush to Adams, July 9, 1807, *ibid.*, 97-98.

or safety by the sacrifice or the neglect of our friends or our country. This may be cunning, but is more properly called knavery than prudence. . . . By prudence I mean that deliberation and caution which aims at no ends but good ones, and good ones by none but fair means, and then carefully adjusts and proportions its good means to its good ends. Without this virtue there can be no other. Justice itself cannot exist without it. A disposition to render to everyone his right is of no use without prudence to judge of what is his right and skill to perform it.”⁸³

We are truly fortunate that many of the Founders preserved their correspondence and papers for future generations. John Adams hoped that Samuel Adams would make a complete Collection of his Writings and publish them in Volumes. I know of no greater service that could be rendered to the Rights of Mankind . . . There Posterity will find a Mass of Principles, and Reasonings, Suitable for them and for all good Men.⁸⁴

John Adams told Jefferson that he hoped “one day your letters will be all published in volumes; they will not always appear Orthodox, or liberal in politics; but they will exhibit a Mass of Taste, Sense, Literature and Science, presented in a sweet simplicity and a neat elegance of Style, which will be read with delight in future ages.”⁸⁵ Somewhat rationalizing about never writing a history of the Revolutionary era, Jefferson believed that his correspondence afforded, in fact, a more accurate history of his time because it was often “less guarded” and because it was “not meant for the public eye, not restrained by the respect due to that; but poured forth from the overflowings of the heart into the bosom of a friend, as a momentary easement of our feelings.

⁸³ Adams to Rush, September 1, 1807, *ibid.*, 99.

⁸⁴ John Adams to Abigail Adams, Paris, March 28, 1783, *Adams Family Correspondence*, V 111.

⁸⁵ Adams to Jefferson, Quincy, July 12, 1822, *The Adams-Jefferson Letters . . .*, ed. by Lester J. Cappon (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1959), 582.

⁸⁶ “Written too in the moment, and in the warmth and freshness of fact and feeling,” correspondence carries “internal evidence that what they breathe is genuine.”⁸⁷ Adams chastised his close friend Dr. Benjamin Rush for destroying a collection of anecdotes and documents amassed in order to write his memoirs of the Revolution. Rush said that his history would differ from others and that he would “offend by telling the truth.” Adams told Rush that “the burning of your documents was . . . a very rash action, and by no means justifiable upon good principles. Truth, justice, and humanity are of eternal obligation, and we ought to preserve the evidence which can alone support them. I do not intend to let every lie impose upon posterity.” It was “from the memoirs [and letters] of individuals the true springs of events and the real motives of actions are to be made known to posterity.”⁸⁸

On at least three occasions Abigail Adams pleaded with her husband to destroy her correspondence. He always responded similarly. Her letters were more than a mere communication between two people separated by many miles geographically. They were a way for him “to hear you think, or to see your Thoughts.” Her letters, he wrote her, make “my Heart throb, more than a Cannonade would. You bid me burn your Letters. But I must forget you first.”⁸⁹ While riding the circuit in Maine, Adams wrote Abigail every day and sometimes twice a day. He admonished her to “keep these Letters chiefly to yourself, and communicate them with great Caution and Reserve. I should advise you to put them up safe, and preserve them. They

⁸⁶ Jefferson to John Adams, Monticello, June 27, 1813, *Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 336.

⁸⁷ Thomas Jefferson to William Johnson, Monticello, March 4, 1823, *The Quotable Jefferson*, 185.

⁸⁸ See Rush to Adams, August 14, 1805 and Adams to Rush, August 23 and December 4, 1805, *Spur of Fame*, 33, 34, 45.

⁸⁹ John Adams to Abigail Adams, Philadelphia, April 28, 1776, L.H. Butterfield, Marc Friedlaender, and Mary-Jo Kline, eds., *The Book of Abigail and John: Selected Letters of the Adams Family, 1762-1784* (Cambridge, Mass., 1975), 125.

may exhibit to our Posterity a kind of Picture of the Manners, Opinions, and Principles of these Times of Perplexity, Danger and Distress.”⁹⁰

In a letter labeled “Private and quite confidential,” George Washington told Secretary of War James McHenry that he should burn the letter immediately after reading it. Washington told McHenry he would do the same with the response so “that neither the one, nor the other may appear hereafter.” Fortunately, the man who (according to Parson Weems) as a child could never tell a lie, retained both the file copy of his own letter and the response from McHenry.⁹¹

Washington just could not bring himself to destroy a portion of his correspondence.

Unfortunately, however, after the death of their spouses, both Martha Washington and Thomas Jefferson destroyed their correspondence with their spouses. These were monumental losses since these personal exchanges contained things found no where else. Sometimes things were written in letters that never would have been said in person. Abigail Adams wrote John that “My pen is always freer than my tongue. I have wrote many things to you that I suppose I never could have talk’d.”⁹² Leonard Gansevoort, a New York delegate to Congress, described letter writing as “a Measure which the Almighty has been pleased in his wise providence to dispense to us for the purpose of cultivating the social Virtues and rendering the flames of Friendship, of fraternal Affection and the Ties of Duty flowing from them alive, and not suffer those Ornaments of the Human Mind to be extinguished.”⁹³

⁹⁰ John Adams to Abigail Adams, York, Maine, July 2, 1774, *Adams Family Correspondence*, I, 121.

⁹¹ Washington to McHenry, Mount Vernon, October 1, 1798, *GW Papers*, Retirement Series, III, 66, 82.

⁹² Abigail Adams to John Adams, Braintree, October 22, 1775, *Adams Family Correspondence*, I, 310.

⁹³ To Peter Gansevoort, New York, March 18, 1788, Gansevoort-Lansing Papers, New York Public Library.

We, individually and as a nation, are enriched because of this literary heritage. It is from this heritage, preserved by a very special generation, and brought to light by a myriad of dedicated documentary editors, that the following word portraits have been gleaned.

