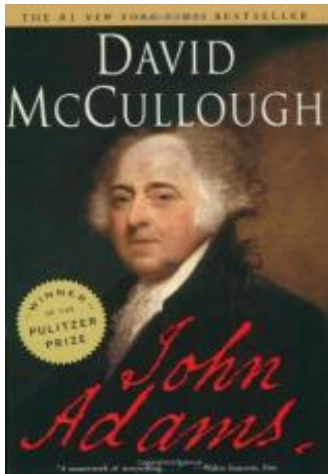


# John Adams

by David McCullough

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## About the Book

In this powerful, epic biography, David McCullough unfolds the adventurous life journey of John Adams, the brilliant, fiercely independent, often irascible, always honest Yankee patriot who spared nothing in his zeal for the American Revolution; who rose to become the second president of the United States and saved the country from blundering into an unnecessary war; who was learned beyond all but a few and regarded by some as "out of his senses"; and whose marriage to the wise and valiant Abigail Adams is one of the most moving love stories in American history.

This is history on a grand scale --- a book about politics and war and social issues, but also about human nature, love, religious faith, virtue, ambition, friendship, and betrayal, and the far-reaching consequences of noble ideas. Above all, **John Adams** is an enthralling, often surprising story of one of the most important and fascinating Americans who ever lived.

## Discussion Guide

1. John Adams had an insatiable desire to explore human nature. In defending the British soldiers involved in The Boston Massacre, Adams says to the jury, "Facts are stubborn things, and whatever may be our wishes, our inclinations, or the dictums of our passions, they cannot alter the state of facts and evidence." How has his decision to defend the British Army, even under suspicion of political treason, prepared him to draft a strong argument for independence?
2. In *Thoughts on Government*, Adams begins to formulate thoughts on public education. Adams writes, "Laws for the liberal education of youth, especially for the lower classes of people, are so extremely wise and useful..." When Adams was a young boy he dismissed the idea of education and only wished to be a farmer. How has his background influenced his opinion on education? Why did he see education as essential to the farmer as to the statesman in the pursuit of an independent nation?

3. On slavery, Abigail Adams writes, "It always seem a most iniquitous scheme to me- [to] fight ourselves for what we are daily robbing and plundering from those who have as good a right to freedom as we have." Even Adams with his great display of integrity during The Boston Massacre trial, has managed to omit the issue of slavery from the Declaration of Independence. Who in Congress owned slaves and who did not? How could the abolition of slavery have helped The American Revolution? What stakes were involved?

4. John Adams' voyage to France along with 10-year-old John Quincy took an incredible toll on Abigail. How has Abigail been an inspiration to her "good friend"? Why does their relationship seem an anomaly in this time period? How has his relationship with Abigail influenced his admiration for French women? Would you call John Adams a feminist? Why or why not? Give examples.

5. John Adams led an obstinate quest to gather military and economic support from both the French and Dutch governments with little financial or moral support from Congress. Adams' feels very isolated at this point in the struggle for independence and often feels like he is running a one-man-show despite the fact that his ability to secure a loan from the Dutch was undoubtedly dependent upon the British General Cornwallis' surrender at Virginia. After reviewing the larger picture, what are the events and circumstances in Adams' life during this time that has made him feel politically isolated? Was he in fact running a one-man-show? Explain.

6. In London, Adams publishes, A Defense of the Constitutions of Government of The United States of America. The crux of this pamphlet stresses the necessity for a government to establish a check and balance of political power. Adams writes that there is "a natural aristocracy among mankind... These were the people who had the capacity to acquire great wealth and make use of political power, and for all they contributed to society, they could thus become the most dangerous element in society..." In the current state of the United States Government, some would argue that it is ruled by the aristocracy, some may even go so far as to argue that the U.S. is currently ruled by a monarchy. What are your thoughts on the government of the United States? Is the United States realizing John Adams' dream? Why or why not?

7. In 1783, the United States is officially recognized by the world as an independent nation upon the signing of the Treaty of Paris. During this time, Adams recognizes a moral shift amongst the American people. James Warren writes that patriotism has been abandoned to money and materialism. How has the institution of slavery influenced the morale of American people? Does the economic value of slavery make creating a unified government more challenging? Why?

8. Adams displays a bit of apprehension toward his nomination for Vice President of the United States. Article I, Section 3, of the Constitution states that "[the Vice President] shall be President of the Senate, but shall have no vote, unless they be equally divided." It would seem as though Adams, a man so firm in his opinions, with the plainness of a teacher and the persuasion of a lawyer would be perfect for the Vice Presidency. Why didn't he think so? Why do you think he won by such a small margin?

9. In 1798, the United States prepares to go to war with France. Adams' initial interactions with France during the Revolutionary War led to his apprehension on entering into a hasty relationship with the French. In a letter to Roger Sherman Adams warned of excessive attention to what the French thought, what France wanted, and writes that there was "too much [French] influence in our deliberations". What was the turning point in the United States relationship with France? What left the United States so vulnerable to the French?

10. On Adams McCullough writes, "...he seems not to have viewed the presidency as an ultimate career objective or

crowning life achievement. He was not one given to seeing life as a climb to the top of a ladder or mountain, but more as a journey or adventure... if anything, he was inclined to look back upon the long struggle for independence as the proud defining chapter." What do you think was driving the life of John Adams? What were his motivations?

**11.** There is still much speculation over Thomas Jefferson's relationship with Sally Hemings. In a letter to Jefferson, Abigail Adams felt that a president should serve as an example on the manners and morals of the nation. What are your thoughts on Abigail's statement?

**12.** Abigail Adams dies on October 28, 1818. At her bedside John Adams says, "I wish I could lie down beside her and die too." To John Adams and his peers Abigail was much more than Adams' wife she was a colleague, and many remarked on her wit. As stateswomen, how has her role in politics paved the way for the first ladies that will succeed her, what do you feel is the role of the President's wife?

## Author Bio

David McCullough (1933-2022) twice received the Pulitzer Prize, for TRUMAN and JOHN ADAMS, and twice received the National Book Award, for THE PATH BETWEEN THE SEAS and MORNINGS ON HORSEBACK. His other acclaimed books include THE JOHNSTOWN FLOOD, THE GREAT BRIDGE, BRAVE COMPANIONS, 1776, THE GREATER JOURNEY, THE AMERICAN SPIRIT, THE WRIGHT BROTHERS and THE PIONEERS. He was the recipient of numerous honors and awards, including the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest civilian award.

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