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Yankee Continentalism

The Provincial Roots of John Adams's Vision for American Union, 1755–1776

J. Patrick Mullins

On July 3, 1776, John Adams took a moment to reflect on Congress's adoption of a resolution declaring the thirteen colonies to be thirteen states, independent of the British Crown. The delegate from Massachusetts wrote his wife, Abigail, a letter often quoted in future centuries for its powers of prophecy. "Yesterday the greatest Question was decided, which ever was debated in America," he scrawled breathlessly, "and a greater perhaps, never was or will be decided among Men." He predicted that the "Second Day of July 1776, will be the most memorable Epocha, in the History of America." It "will be celebrated, by succeeding Generations, as the great anniversary Festival" and "solemnized with Pomp and Parade, with Shews, Games, Sports, Guns, Bells, Bonfires and Illuminations from one End of this Continent to the other from this Time forward forever more." Today's casual readers of the letter may delight in Adams's forecast of our summertime parades and fireworks displays, chuckling wryly at his error in thinking that July 2 would be celebrated as our nation's birthday. Taking the outcome of the war and the survival of the union for granted, they may overlook the truly astonishing prophecy this letter contains. Adams predicted confidently that the Revolutionary War against the British Empire would succeed in securing American independence, that America would extend "from one End of this Continent to the other," and that this independent, continental, and united America would persist "forever more."¹

There seemed to be little basis for such optimism on July 3, 1776. On the same day that John Adams composed his letter, British regulars landed on Staten Island, the vanguard for an invasion of New York by the largest expeditionary force Britain had ever deployed. As John wrote Abigail from Philadelphia, there were many sound reasons to question America's prospects in its bid for independence from the mightiest empire in Europe. John Adams knew his exuberant prediction that Americans would celebrate their national independence "from this Time forward forever more" might come across to his wife as no better grounded in reason and evidence than the millenarian prophecies of New Light evangelists touched with religious "Enthusiasm." Adams immediately added,

You will think me transported with Enthusiasm but I am not—I am well aware of the Toil and Blood and Treasure, that it will cost Us to maintain this Declaration, and support and defend these States.—Yet through all the Gloom I can see the Rays of ravishing Light and Glory. I can see that the End is more than worth all the Means. And that Posterity will triumph in that Days Transaction, even altho We should rue it, which I trust in God We shall not.²

Why, indeed, in the absence of wishful thinking or ignorance of the "Toil and Blood and Treasure" required for victory, could Adams be so confident that the Revolutionary War would end in American independence? Why was Adams committed so firmly to a vision of America as a successful continental

union? Why did he believe the American people capable of responsible self-government through the mechanism of a representative, constitutional republic, independent of direction from a hereditary king or aristocracy?

John Adams was no more a foolish dreamer than he was a cynical curmudgeon. He was a practical idealist whose prophecies of America as a successful continental republic followed from his Harvard education and Protestant upbringing, careful observation of human behavior, critical reflection on New England's history, and personal experience with law and politics in Massachusetts and the Continental Congress. In a 1755 letter to his friend Nathan Webb at the start of the Seven Years' War, the recent Harvard graduate offered a forecast of British America's future as a continental power, but it remained abstract and derivative. From his work as a Yankee attorney and his firsthand observation of growing political conflict between Massachusetts and the British Crown, Adams had developed by 1765 a vision of America as a stronghold of civil and religious liberty, blessed with a balanced constitution, a pious and well-educated population, and over a century of experience with self-government on the township and provincial levels. Lacking direct knowledge of the colonies outside of New England, young Adams initially imagined "America" in his *Dissertation on the Canon and the Feudal Law* as if it were New England writ large, applying to all thirteen colonies the generalizations he had formed about New England's fitness for liberty. Perhaps greater understanding of the more aristocratic cast of politics in the middle and southern colonies would have given him pause. Ironically, Adams's very provincialism insulated him from early doubts about the American people's ability to govern themselves through consensual political institutions on a continental scale.

As service in the First and Second Continental Congresses brought Adams into contact with the mercantile and planter gentry who largely prevailed as the ruling class of the middle and southern colonies, he became better informed of the differences in social structure, economic interest, political culture, and diplomatic objectives among British America's regions. With experience in Congress, Adams adjusted his vision of union to accommodate such regional distinctions, as he acknowledged that only union with the other colonies could secure the rights and interests of New England against Britain's military onslaught in 1775. Adams came to worry about the republican *bona fides* of non-Yankees and the future outlook for New England in a union with slaveholding aristocrats and gentlemen of substantial fortune. Yet he distinguished himself in Congress as a strenuous advocate for continental union and ultimately the foremost champion of American independence. His wartime unionism was more realistic in its acknowledgment of regional differences among the colonies, but it was no less ardent. And it remained grounded in an unwavering identification with New England. In the spring of 1776, Adams worked for the formation of republican governments by the states. His *Thoughts on Government* provided the outline for a completely republican state constitution, based largely on the Massachusetts provincial charter. With this constitutional model, New England would offer guidance in popular self-government and constitutionalism to the other states. By the moral and intellectual example of its people, New England would serve as the bulwark of civic virtue and civil liberty in America's experiment with continental republicanism.

From its first stirrings in September 1755 to its full development by July 1776, Adams's distinctive vision of American union was paradoxically provincial in its roots. "No American leader," notes historian Richard Alan Ryerson, "was a more dedicated provincial—in 1765, in 1776, or in 1789—than the ardent nationalist John Adams, of Braintree, Massachusetts." Adams was not alone among the statesmen of the revolutionary era in being provincial and "nationalist" at the same time. Rejecting the interpretation that James Madison had been a centralizing nationalist in the 1780s, historian Lance Banning describes Madison as a "Virginia continentalist" whose "special kind of continentalism was a distinctive product of his experiences and perspectives as a statesman of the Old Dominion." Banning notes that Madison's vision of continental union aimed to accommodate "sectional differences," and he pursued the strengthening of the union through a new federal constitution as the best security for the long-term interests of Virginia. Adams believed that the same was true for his native Massachusetts in particular and New England in general. Like Madison's "Virginia continentalism," Adams's vision of American union can best be understood not as some anticipation of a nineteenth-century-style American nationalism but as "Yankee continentalism," a vision of continental union following and inseparable from Adams's formative experience with eighteenth-century Massachusetts politics.³

Adams's devotion to both America and New England remained constant throughout his adult life, but his understanding of America and how New England related to it developed over time. In tracking the emergence and evolution of his Yankee continentalism, I focus on key indicators of his political thinking from 1755 to the publication of his *Thoughts on Government* in 1776. Over these two decades, Adams's vision for America took three major forms: America as New England in macrocosm, the union as the best security for New England's interests, and an American republic as reformed in accord with the New England model. As "Virginia continentalism" helped Lance Banning answer the "James Madison problem," so the interpretive concept of Yankee continentalism enables us to reconcile Adams's lifelong attachment to New England with his lifelong commitment to continental union, thereby resolving the paradox of Adams as both a "dedicated provincial" and an "ardent nationalist."

John Adams had formed the concept of America as a continental union of self-governing colonies at least by the week preceding his twentieth birthday, during the second year of the Seven Years' War. In the wake of General William Johnson's strategic victory in the Battle of Lake George on September 8, 1755, Yankee hopes rebounded that British forces might achieve their objective of expelling the French from Canada, thereby securing New England from frontier raids by Indians and long dreaded invasion by French Catholic troops. Young Adams imbibed the renewed morale and participated in political debate on the progress of the war. A recent graduate of Harvard College, he was teaching school in Worcester, Massachusetts, when he wrote his friend Nathan Webb a letter on October 12, 1755. "If we look into History," he observed, "we shall find some nations rising from contemptible beginnings, and spreading their influence, 'till the whole Globe is subjected to their sway. When they have reach'd the summit of Grandeur, some minute and unsuspected Cause commonly effects their Ruin, and the Empire of the world is transferr'd to some other place." He cited the rise of ancient Rome and modern England from rural poverty and peripheral insignificance to commercial wealth and geopolitical hegemony as examples of the rise and fall of empires. This cyclical view of history and the recent circumstances of war led him to exuberant thoughts about the destiny of British America.⁴

True to his upbringing in New England Congregationalism, Adams saw the Protestant Reformation as the primary force that set in motion British settlement of eastern North America. "Soon after the Reformation," he wrote Webb, "a few people came over into this new world for Conscience sake. Perhaps this (apparently) trivial incident, may transfer the great seat of Empire into America. It looks likely to me. For if we can remove the turbulent Gallicks, our People according to the exactest Computations, will in another Century, become more numerous than England itself." Another factor contributing to the shift of world power from England to America, Adams believed, was New England's production of naval stores, for the manufacture and outfitting of a fleet would enable British America to "gain the mastery of the seas, and then the united force of all Europe, will not be able to subdue us." He noted that the principal factor obstructing this destiny was the division of British America into thirteen colonies. "The only way to keep us from setting up for ourselves, is to disunite us," he concluded. "Divide et impera." He saw this disunity as the result not of plotting London officials but of machinations by politicians in each colony, ambitious to dominate the others. He likely had in mind the failure of the Albany Plan of Union to gain support within provincial assemblies the preceding year.⁵

Adams's 1755 letter to Nathan Webb is certainly the stuff of prophecy. It conflates his idea of "America" with New England, as he considered the religious convictions of Protestant dissenters from the Church of England to be the primary motive for settlement of the thirteen colonies, a claim that can reasonably be made only of New England. But he predicted correctly the exponential growth of the British American population until it surpassed the population of England, the continental unification of the colonies, the political independence of America from Britain, America's naval and maritime power as the key to national security, America's replacement of Britain as the world's hegemonic power, and the threat posed to continental union by provincial factionalism. This vision of America's future as a continental power seems extraordinary in a twenty-year-old schoolteacher in 1755. But such heady dreams were in the cultural air at the time, stimulated by the bold objectives of the British war effort to seize control of Canada from France. Adams remarked to Webb in the same letter, "Be not surprised that I am turn'd

Politician. This whole town is immers'd in Politics. The interests of Nations, and all the dira of War, make the subject of every Conversation.”⁶

Adams's claim in his letter that “our People according to the exactest Computations, will in another Century, become more numerous than England itself” suggests the influence of Benjamin Franklin's pamphlet *Observations Concerning the Increase of Mankind*. Aggravated by Britain's restraint of colonial manufacturing with the Iron Act of 1750, Franklin wrote his essay in 1751, but it was not published until 1755. He provided his own prophecy of America's future as a great power, derived from statistical analysis. Positing that population growth follows from the number of marriages, and the number of marriages increases with “the Ease and Convenience of supporting a Family,” Franklin contended, “When Families can be easily supported, more Persons marry, and earlier in Life.” With a greater number of marriages beginning earlier in life, America could expect to see its population double in size roughly every twenty years. “This Million doubling, suppose but once in 25 Years, will in another Century be more than the People of England,” Franklin concluded, “and the greatest Number of Englishmen will be on this Side the Water.”⁷

While Franklin saw demographic growth through natural reproduction, facilitated by the abundance of cheap land, as the inexorable engine of American power, Adams came to see America's destiny as conditional on the rationality and virtue of the American people. During his education at Harvard, Adams was immersed in a worldview that historians have styled enlightened dissent or rational dissent, a synthesis of British Enlightenment rationalism with Protestant dissent against the Church of England. This intellectual persuasion affirmed the value of reason for comprehension of scripture as well as the natural world, and the value of liberty in governance of church as well as state. Throughout his life, Adams extolled the human capacity to understand and command the natural world through reason. In his diary entry of May 17, 1756, he wrote that man, “by the Exercise of his Reason can invent Engines and Instruments, to take advantage of the Powers in Nature, and accomplish the most astonishing Designs,” such as turning a valley into a mountain and a mountain into a valley. Man can cultivate the land and make it more fruitful, communicate over vast distances, and explore both the heavens and the microscopic world with scientific instruments. In the entry of June 15, 1756, he similarly remarked on the transformation of the American landscape over less than two centuries, from “one continued dismall Wilderness, the haunt of Wolves and Bears and more savage men,” to abundant crops and orchards and “the magnificent Habitations of rational and civilized People.” The settlement and cultivation of North America's Atlantic Coast provided ample empirical evidence of the human rational faculty and its exercise by average people to improve their condition of life and pursue earthly happiness.⁸

Young Adams believed that human goodness and happiness depend on the active direction of action by reason, the rigorous cultivation of moral character, and the systematic education of intellect and refinement of appetite. On June 21, 1756, he expressed his “fixt Determination” to improve his knowledge. “May I blush whenever I suffer one hour to pass unimproved,” he wrote. “I will rouse up my mind, and fix my Attention. I will stand collected within my self and think upon what I read and what I see. I will strive with all my soul to be something more than Persons who have less Advantages than myself.” With an intellectual debt to both John Locke and Adams's soul-searching Puritan forbears, the diary demonstrates Adams's internal struggle to exercise reason, practice virtue, and wrestle with his own vices, such as vanity and sloth. From his literary research, observation of human behavior, introspection, and projection of his own mental states onto his fellow humans, Adams concluded that human nature includes both a rational faculty and passions that can lead it astray. He scribbled in his diary on May 11, 1756, that truth and right are universal, and “pure unbiassed Reason” can grasp universal truth and right, but humans can “suffer our Understandings to be blinded or perverted” by “Passion, Prejudice, Interest, Custom, and Fancy.” The odds are “millions to one, that we shall embrace error. And hence arises that endless Variety of Opinions entertained by Mankind.” While Adams's interpretation of human behavior and of America's historical development shifted in emphasis over time according to private and public circumstances, these shifts occurred within the parameters set by a conception of human nature that drew on and sought to reconcile Enlightenment rationalism and New England Congregationalism.⁹

At the height of his political career as vice president and president in the 1790s, Adams acquired the

reputation of an admirer of hereditary monarchy and aristocracy, skeptical about the capacity of common people for self-government. As early as the 1760s, however, he demonstrated a respect for the mind of the common person, which followed from his belief in the natural capacity of men and women for reason and virtue, and each individual's natural duty to think independently. In a 1761 letter to fellow Boston lawyer Samuel Quincy, Adams rejected the characterization of "Genius" as "a rare Phenomenon" by such modern English authors as Lord Bolingbroke or Alexander Pope, comparing this elitist view unfavorably with the Calvinist doctrine of unconditional election. "We have much higher Notions of the efficacy of human endeavours in all Cases," he intoned. All humans are born with the natural capacity for genius, just as they possess height, beauty, strength, and sensibility, albeit in differing, unequal degrees. Old World elitists acknowledged genius only in "those few, who have been directed, by their birth, education and lucky accidents, to distinguish themselves in arts and sciences, or in the execution of what the World calls great Affairs, instead of planting Corn, freighting Oysters, and killing Deer, the worthy employments in which most real Geniuses are engaged—for in truth according to that definition the world swarms with Them." Possessing that degree of genius known as "Common Sense," common people display their creative thinking in their daily labor.¹⁰ Adams waxed poetic:

Go on board an Oyster-boat, and converse with the Skipper, he will relate as many instances of invention, and intrepidity too, as you will find in the lives of many British Admirals, who shine in history as the ornaments of their Country. Enquire of a Gunner in Braintree-bay, or of a Hunter upon the Frontiers of their Province, and you will hear of as many artful devices to take their Game, as you will read in the lives of Caesar, or Charles or Frederick. And as genius is more common, it seems to me it is much more powerful than is generally thought. . . . The gods sell all Things to Industry, and Invention among the Rest.¹¹

Persuaded that all people possess the natural right, duty, and ability to think for themselves, Adams believed that the average working person was capable of independent reasoning, moral self-direction, and economic self-support. This conviction was affirmed empirically in part from Adams's observation of his fellow New Englanders: the farmer, hunter, oysterman, and "Gunner in Braintree-bay." His experience with the Yankee middling sort and laboring folk fed Adams's confidence in the common people's capacity to improve their own condition, behave virtuously, and govern themselves responsibly.

A crisis in constitutional relations between the British government and the American colonies gathered momentum over the course of the 1760s, drawing the Braintree lawyer into public commentary on the nature of government and the proper constitutional place of America within the British Empire. In the summer of 1763, Adams wrote a series of anonymous articles about local political controversies for the *Boston Gazette*. In one essay that he did not submit for publication, Adams expounded on the human appetite for power. While he believed that all humans have a natural capacity for virtue and reason, he did not think that virtuous and rational behavior would come automatically, for there are countervailing passions that require firm restraint. Adams claimed provocatively that "all Men would be Tyrants if they could." He insisted that he did not mean, by this maxim, that human nature had been deprived totally by original sin. Rather, it followed from the observation that any person's capacity for "self-love" will always prevail over his capacity for sociability if he is "left to the natural Emotions of his own Mind, unrestrained and unchecked by other Power extrinsic to himself." Even the wisest man, once endowed with power over other men, will abuse it for his own advantage. "Power is a Thing of infinite Danger and Delicacy, and was never yet confided to any Man or any Body of Men without turning their heads," he warned. Adams's understanding of the "usurping and encroaching Nature of Power" as woven into the nature of man led him to his core principle on the question of the proper form of government: "No simple Form of Government, can possibly secure Men against the Violences of Power." Monarchy metastasizes into despotism, aristocracy degenerates into oligarchy, and democracy slides headlong into anarchy. Only by placing checks on the exercise of power by humans over other humans—whether the one, the few, or the

many—can there be security for “Mans life or Property or Reputation or Liberty,” which is the proper object of government. Developed by Adams early in the imperial crisis, these basic principles about the proper form of government guided him throughout his life and informed both his hopes and fears for the future of America.¹²

Adams published his first formal political pamphlet at the height of the Stamp Act Crisis. Printed in the *Boston Gazette* as a series of installments in August, September, and October 1765, it was subsequently published in November and December 1765 in the *London Chronicle*, under the auspices of English philanthropist Thomas Hollis, with Hollis’s title, *A Dissertation on the Canon and the Feudal Law*. In the *Dissertation*, Adams offered an account of the sources of liberty in British America—and the growing threats to it. The central premise of the *Dissertation*, presented early in the first of four installments, is that “whenever a general knowledge and sensibility have prevail’d among the *people*, arbitrary government, and every kind of oppression, have lessened and disappeared in proportion.”¹³ Far from a Calvinist advocate of the total depravity of man, Adams intoned that “Man has certainly an exalted soul!” But that soul is capable of descending to great depths as well as reaching great heights. He claimed that the “love of power” is rooted in the human soul. The love of power—when its object is control of other men—“has always prompted the princes and nobles of the earth, by every species of fraud and violence, to shake off, all the *limitations* of their power.” That same love of power, however, fuels the people’s yearning for self-government, having “always stimulated the common people to aspire at independency, and to endeavor at confining the power of the great within the limits of *equity* and *reason*.” The universal love of power—springing from the self-love that Adams described in an unpublished 1763 essay—can therefore be enlisted in “the cause of *slavery*” as well as in “the cause of *freedom*.” Lacking “leisure or opportunity” to acquire the knowledge of “arts and letters” required to “form an union and exert their strength,” the “poor people” have more often failed in their struggle for freedom than they have succeeded. Despite their small numbers, Adams explained, kings and nobles rule with impunity by keeping the masses ignorant of “the knowledge of their rights and wrongs, and the power to assert the former or redress the latter.” The people can only prevail against their oppressors when the love of freedom is guided by a rational understanding of their rights and the best way to secure those rights. Adams took a moment to make clear that these rights are not mere privileges granted by kings in charters. They are rights “antecedent to all earthly government—*Rights* that cannot be repealed or restrained by human laws—*Rights* derived from the great legislator of the universe.”¹⁴

From the dawn of the Christian era, Adams contended in the *Dissertation*, the natural rights of the people have been systematically suppressed by “the two greatest systems of tyranny,” namely the canon law, which gave the Roman Catholic Church jurisdiction over the minds of people, and the feudal law, which gave princes and nobles jurisdiction over their bodies. The Catholic Church and Europe’s feudal monarchies struck up “a wicked confederacy” to support one another in their coordinated conspiracy against the commoners. In the Middle Ages, “Liberty, and with her, Knowledge and Virtue too, seem to have deserted the earth.” Adams credited the Protestant Reformation, “especially in *England*,” with beginning the process of reopening the minds of the common people. With the spread of knowledge, “*ecclesiastical* and *civil* tyranny” declined. True to his Yankee identification with British Protestant nonconformity, Adams viewed the episcopal polity of the Church of England as a species of ecclesiastical tyranny, violating a congregation’s right to govern itself. In seventeenth-century England, the Stuart dynasty tried to roll back the advancement of religious and political knowledge and civil and religious liberty in England, resulting in bloody civil war. “It was this great struggle, that peopled America,” Adams contended. “It was not religion *alone*, as is commonly supposed; but it was a love of *universal Liberty*, and an hatred, a dread, an horror of the infernal confederacy, before described, that projected, conducted, and accomplished the settlement of America.”¹⁵ Under the rising menace of British despotism, Adams’s vision had expanded. In his 1765 account of the peopling of America, his ancestors, the English Puritans, still played the central role, but he characterized them in terms of the worldview of rational dissent. They were distinguished from England’s Episcopalian majority not just by tender consciences on the fine points of theology and forms of worship but by a principled commitment to civil and religious liberty.

Reinterpreting New England history in light of the Stamp Act Crisis, Adams came to see opposition to all arbitrary power—oppressive kings along with oppressive bishops—as the fundamental motive spurring Protestant nonconformists to leave Britain for North America’s Atlantic seaboard.

The seventeenth-century Puritans of Adams’s *Dissertation* were both proto-Enlightenment rationalists (though not freethinkers) and proto-Whig libertarians (though not republicans). While acknowledging their “imperfections,” he denied that the Puritans were “enthusiastical, superstitious and republican.” He styled New England’s Puritan settlers as “a sensible people” who had “become intelligent in general, and many of them learned.” They were religious enthusiasts in an enthusiastic era, but their religion demonstrated “wise, humane and benevolent principles,” “founded in revelation, and in reason too.” Adams explained that the Puritans had been persecuted by civil and ecclesiastical authorities in England “for no other crime than their knowledge, and their freedom of enquiry and examination.” The Puritans fled to the New England wilderness and secured both civil and religious liberty by framing the constitution of their church and state “in *direct opposition* to the *cannon* and the *feudal* systems.” Finding the Puritans admirable by Enlightenment standards, he extolled them for a hatred of “Tyranny in every form, shape, and appearance.” Adams insisted that the Puritans were not regicidal republicans, but they saw the need for “popular powers” to serve as “a guard, a controul, a balance, to the powers of the monarch, and the priest, in every government.” Repudiating the Episcopalian doctrines of divine right and passive obedience, “they knew that government was a plain, simple, intelligible thing founded in nature and reason and quite comprehensible by common sense.” As reason, religion, virtue, and liberty depend on knowledge, New England’s founders created public schools, funded by a town assessment, to assure that “knowledge [would be] diffused generally thro’ the whole body of the people.” Adams credited these measures with the high degree of “knowledge and civility among the common people” of British America in his own day, which he saw as the safeguard of their liberty. He concluded wryly, “A native of America who cannot read and write is as rare an appearance, as a Jacobite or a Roman Catholic.”¹⁶

Adams’s *Dissertation* offered a conservative defense of liberty as a patrimony already enjoyed by Americans in the 1760s. “We have a right to it, derived from our Maker,” Adams maintained, “But if we had not, our fathers have earned, and bought it for us, at the expense of their ease, their estates, their pleasure, and their blood. And liberty cannot be preserved without a general knowledge among the people, who have a right from the frame of their nature, to knowledge, as their great Creator who does nothing in vain, has given them understandings, and a desire to know.” The people particularly have a natural right to know “the characters and conduct of their rulers,” who are “no more than the attorneys, agents and trustees for the people.” Adams treated common people’s understanding of their rights—and of any threats to those rights from their rulers—as a necessary safeguard of liberty.¹⁷

Adams urged the American press to bring abuses of power to public attention and not be intimidated by threats from royal governors. Corrupt British officials thought they could impose the Stamp Act on America, Adams’s *Dissertation* contended, because they saw the colonists as “an ignorant, a timid and a stupid people.” American liberty was at risk in 1765 because “We have been afraid to think.” The colonists had shown too much deference to British authority. It was not enough for the people simply to reignite their love of freedom, a spirit that, “without knowledge, would be little better than a brutal rage.” In the fourth installment and climax of the *Dissertation*, Adams urged the American people to reason for themselves, renew their understanding of political science, and beware of the thin edge of the wedge of tyranny: “Let us tenderly and kindly cherish, therefore the means of knowledge. Let us dare to read, think, speak and write. Let every order and degree among the people rouse their attention and animate their virtue.” Adams thought the common people had a duty to consider political questions and engage in the controversies of the day. He spurred colonial intellectuals—college professors, clergymen, and lawyers—to show leadership in facilitating the spread of political knowledge: “In a word, let every sluice of knowledge be open’d and set a flowing.” The young author’s exuberance turned dark, as he concluded with the warning, “There seems to be a direct and formal design on foot, to enslave all America.” This imposition of despotism “must be done by degrees,” and the introduction of canon and feudal law through the Stamp Act was the beginning. A tax on the printed word, he concluded, had the manifest effect of curtailing the knowledge on which the virtue and liberty of the people depended.¹⁸

From his experience with Yankee farmers educated in township schools, Adams came to view the common people as capable of rational deliberation and sober judgment. He believed that America already enjoyed civil and religious liberty because its first settlers—inspired by a love of liberty and equipped with political knowledge—had created public institutions to secure liberty and knowledge for their posterity. It was because the common people possessed education that British America enjoyed freedom while “nine tenths of the species, are groaning and gasping in misery and servitude.” Adams characterized Americans in the *Dissertation* as exceptional in their liberty and education, treating both as values endangered in 1765 by tyranny and corruption from the British government. Socioeconomic factors (such as demographic growth and abundance of arable land or naval stores) did not figure in this interpretation of America, as they had in the Webb letter ten years earlier. Having moved beyond Franklin’s more demographic and economic interpretation of America’s future, Adams had developed a vision of his own, defined largely in moral, intellectual, and cultural terms. Drawing on a synthesis of New England Congregationalism and Enlightenment rationalism, Adams believed that rationality depended on liberty, and liberty in turn depended on rationality. The two would rise or fall together. Determined that they would not fall in America, Adams joined the fight to educate public opinion and mobilize the people in defense of their rights.¹⁹

Ryerson characterizes the *Dissertation* as “a declaration of New England’s political and cultural superiority that belongs to the rich literature of American exceptionalism.” A thoroughgoing New England man, Adams displayed a pride in his region for its heritage of rational piety, virtue, education, and civil and religious liberty. And he wrote of New England and “America” interchangeably. By the fall of 1765, Adams had never left the confines of New England. He lacked firsthand experience with the other regions of British America. Although proud of his region and provincial in his experience, he was not bigoted against the other colonies, and lack of familiarity with them contributed to his early continentalism. Adams unknowingly projected a Yankee identity onto the colonies lying south of New England. In *Dissertation on the Canon and the Feudal Law*, he conceived of America as in effect a macrocosm of New England. Founded by Puritans fleeing Stuart tyranny, America was liberty-loving, self-governing, virtuous, church-going, prosperous, middle-class, and well educated. Adams identified with America against Britain during the Stamp Act Crisis in part by imagining America as New England writ large. His belief in “New England’s political and cultural superiority” was as yet indistinguishable from his belief in “American exceptionalism.”²⁰

Nine years after repeal of the Stamp Act, Parliament retaliated against Massachusetts for the Boston Tea Party with the Coercive Acts of 1774. Among other provisions, these punitive statutes revoked the Massachusetts charter, closed the port of Boston, and placed the province under the governorship of a British general backed by British regulars. Seeking deliverance through political union with the other colonies, the Massachusetts House of Representatives held off its dissolution by Governor Thomas Gage just long enough to call for a Continental Congress, appointing a delegation that included John Adams. “A Union of the Colonies, in Sentiment and Affection [He]art and Hand,” Adams wrote a friend on June 27, 1774, “is of indispensable Importance. Every Thought [ever]y Expedient for and cementing it, ought to be cherished.” Adams thought of Congress as a political anchor for the moral-intellectual links binding the thirteen colonies together in such a continental union. Upon his appointment to the First Continental Congress, the Yankee lawyer felt apprehensive about his preparedness to deliberate on matters concerning all of the colonies. “I feel my own insufficiency for this important Business,” he wrote fellow Massachusetts lawyer and patriot legislator James Warren on July 17, 1774. “I have not that Knowledge of the Commerce of the several Colonies, nor even of my own Province which may be necessary,” Adams fretted. For all his praise of New England’s public schools back in 1765, he worried, “Our New England Educations, are quite unequal to the Production of Such great Characters” as a Roman senator or British general. Ambition and necessity offset these insecurities, however, and Adams welcomed political experience in the First Continental Congress as his means of acquiring the knowledge of America and wisdom of statecraft that he needed so urgently. He imagined Congress as “a Seminary of American Statesmen, a School of Politicians, perhaps at no great Distance of Time, equal to a british Parliament, in wiser as well as better Ages.”²¹

Adams was keenly aware of the limitations of his upbringing. His father, Deacon John Adams, spent his whole lifetime in Braintree, and the younger John had never before traveled farther from home than Falmouth, in the district of Maine. His departure for Congress in Philadelphia in September 1774 provided his first personal experience of America outside New England. The provincial Yankee lawyer found himself thrust suddenly on the stage of continental and transatlantic politics. Adams rose to the occasion, serving on four major committees, including that which drafted the Declaration of Rights and Grievances. During Congress's almost two-month session, he advanced the interests of persecuted Massachusetts while striking a conciliatory tone favorable to non-Yankee delegates. Although a staunch champion of American continentalism in 1774, he valued a continental union in no small part from provincial motives, as the best security for the rights and interests of New England. With the conclusion of the First Continental Congress, Adams reimmersed himself in Massachusetts politics, taking his seat in the Provincial Congress, as the Massachusetts House of Representatives called itself on reassembling in Concord illegally, in defiance of Governor Gage and Parliament's revocation of the Massachusetts Charter.²²

Adams returned home from the Provincial Congress in December 1774 to find the Tory position on the current crisis represented effectively in the *Massachusetts Gazette* by essays co-authored by his former friends Daniel Leonard and Jonathan Sewall under the ungainly pseudonym "Massachusettensis." Adams took up the Whig position in a series of letters written as "Novanglus" ("New Englander") in the *Boston Gazette* from January to April 1775. Most of these essays were provincial in content. Adams criticized the arguments and conduct of Tory writers in the Massachusetts press, recounted the long political struggle of Massachusetts Whig legislators with former Governor Thomas Hutchinson, defended the Boston Tea Party, and excoriated the crippling of Massachusetts's charter government by Britain's Coercive Acts. The *Letters of Novanglus* betrayed "many signs of a deeply provincial outlook," Ryerson argues, even as they "moved into new political and intellectual territory."²³ In Adams's seventh essay, printed in the *Boston Gazette* on March 6, 1775, he abruptly shifted from provincial politics to a new constitutional conception of the British Empire as a whole. Agreeing with Massachusettensis that there cannot be two supreme legislatures within the same polity, Adams insisted in the March 6 essay that "our provincial legislatures are the only supream authorities in our colonies." The Massachusetts Council and House of Representatives should be understood "in our little models of the English constitution" as the provincial analogues to the British Houses of Lords and Commons. Parliament had no sovereign power over the colonies because the colonists were not represented in it. He denied that the colonies were subject to Parliament's authority but granted that they had consented to parliamentary regulation of trade as suiting their own interest, a position Adams articulated in the First Continental Congress and worked into the Declaration of Rights and Grievances.²⁴

Adams went further in the seventh of his *Letters of Novanglus*, denying that the colonies were subject to the sovereign authority of the king-in-parliament. The colonists owed only personal allegiance to the king of England, under royal charters and oaths of allegiance established by provincial law. It followed that King George III "appears king of the Massachusetts, king of Rhode-Island, king of Connecticut, &c." The king bound the colonies together (and bound the colonies in turn to Britain) in a federal relation. Adams likened this arrangement to the connection of England and Scotland before the 1707 Act of Union, when both nations had their own parliament. Adams grounded his contentions in a review of the colonial charters, and for the first time his political publications gave serious consideration to colonies outside of New England, namely Maryland and Virginia. If the king alone provided the constitutional connection between the colonies and Britain, and neither Parliament nor king-in-parliament had sovereignty over the colonies, Adams reasoned that a political union of colonies providing such a continental-scale authority was required all the more urgently. "A union of the colonies might be projected," he surmised, "and an American legislature." He did not, however, consider such a continental union as incompatible with America's continued connection to Britain as a voluntary arrangement for mutual benefit. In the March 6 essay, he described the thirteen colonies as "a part of the British dominions, that is of the king of Great-Britain, and it is our interest and duty to remain so." He thought that the colonists should continue their consent to Parliament's trade regulations, "as long as she shall leave us to govern our internal policy, and to give and grant our own money." In the *Letters of Novanglus*, Adams's novanglocentric notion of America had given way to a constitutional conception of the thirteen colonies (the middle colonies and the

South along with New England) as having long enjoyed federal union among themselves and legislative independence from Parliament, with the king of England binding them—and a standing American legislature sorely needed.²⁵

Throughout the imperial crisis of 1765–75, Adams remained firmly persuaded that New Englanders had, since the first Puritan plantations, proven themselves capable of conceiving, implementing, operating, and preserving representative institutions with balanced constitutions, which in turn drew their authority from the people's informed consent. Adams believed that Massachusetts, under the revoked 1691 charter, already had a constitutional system that implemented the great principles of separation of powers and checks and balances, comparable favorably with the British constitution. The people of Massachusetts, along with their fellow American colonists, had long enjoyed the sovereign right to tax and legislate for themselves and had demonstrated the capacity to exercise responsibly this measure of self-government. He believed that civil liberty was not a value that New Englanders needed to gain but to conserve—or, in the case of prostrate Massachusetts, to restore. Adams concluded that the thirteen colonies were associated with one another in a *de facto* federal union, held together by the person of the king, and that a stronger union under a Continental Congress was needed to protect American liberty from Parliament—and the king's men.

The Battles of Lexington and Concord on April 19, 1775, made the long dreaded war inescapable, compelling Adams to shift the focus of his attention from provincial and regional politics back to the art of politics on a continental and transatlantic scale, a new challenge for which he was increasingly prepared intellectually. A few days after the running firefight between British regulars and Yankee militia along the road from Concord to Boston, Adams departed on his long journey to Philadelphia for service as a Massachusetts delegate to the Second Continental Congress. On May 21, 1775, the congressman wrote from Philadelphia to inform James Warren of the mobilization of Pennsylvania regiments. He inferred from the “martial Spirit” on display in Philadelphia that “America will Soon be in a Condition to defend itself by Land against all Mankind.” Military mobilization by the provinces south of New England gave Adams hope that continental union would be the salvation of New England. Yankee troops encircling British regulars in Boston would not have to stand alone for long against the aroused might of the British Empire.²⁶

Experience in the Second Continental Congress immediately shook that hope of deliverance from the south. On June 10, Adams wrote his friend Moses Gill, serving on the executive committee of the Massachusetts Provincial Congress, of his irritation that delegates from the mid-Atlantic and southern colonies desired the extension of a diplomatic olive branch to King George III at the same time that they approved military mobilization. “I am myself as fond of Reconciliation,” Adams remarked, “if We could reasonably entertain Hopes of it upon a constitutional Basis, as any Man.” Finding that the British nation was rotted through with corruption, he had become “convinced that the Cancer is too deeply rooted, and too far spread to be cured by any thing short of cutting it out entire.” Humble overtures to the king were not simply hopeless but subversive of the conduct of war. “In my opinion Powder and Artillery are the most efficacious, Sure, and infallibly conciliatory Measures We can adopt,” he quipped grimly. Adams had come to accept that the mid-Atlantic and southern colonies did not share the fullness of New England's commitment to victory. “However, this Continent is a vast, unweildy Machine,” he observed. “We cannot force Events. We must Suffer People to take their own Way in many Cases, when We think it leads wrong—hoping however and believing, that our Liberty and Felicity will be preserved in the End, tho not in the Speedyest and Surest Manner.” Having come to see British America as a whole and as regional parts, Adams adjusted his Yankee continentalism accordingly.²⁷

Union with the middle and southern colonies was essential to the salvation of New England, and the regions of America would rise or fall together in this war against Britain. But, Adams concluded, the coordination of military and diplomatic efforts among the colonies would also generate political conflict, and the preservation and operation of the union would require the statesmanlike skills of tact, restraint, and compromise. On June 14, 1775, Congress created a Continental Army and general staff, formally continentalizing New England's armed revolt against Britain. A Massachusetts man, General Artemas Ward, was in command of the Massachusetts, Connecticut, and New Hampshire troops camped around

Boston, and he was a natural choice to command the Continental Army. True to his matured continental vision, Adams instead nominated the respected delegate from Virginia George Washington as commander in chief, to bind the South more closely to the fortunes of New England.²⁸

As Congress turned to selection of a general staff for the army, however, the question of the rate of pay in the Continental Army set off the first political conflict in Congress between New England and the rest of America. As Adams wrote Elbridge Gerry on June 18, “The pay which has been voted to all the officers, which the Continental Congress intends to choose, is so large, that I fear our people will think it extravagant, and be uneasy. Mr. [Samuel] Adams, Mr. [Robert Treat] Paine, and myself, used our utmost endeavors to reduce it, but in vain.” Delegates from the more aristocratic political cultures of the mid-Atlantic and southern colonies thought that pay in the Massachusetts line was “too high for the privates, and too low for the officers, and they would have their own way.” Adams wrote Gerry that those “ideas of equality, which are so agreeable to us natives of New England, are very disagreeable to many gentlemen in the other colonies.” In New England, the rank and file took for granted the privilege of electing militia officers and keeping the officer corps accountable to the enlisted men. It was precisely this kind of egalitarianism that non-Yankee congressmen opposed as a threat to the subordination, discipline, and respect for the chain of command required for military effectiveness. They accordingly wanted to foster greater social distance between commissioned officers and enlisted men. On June 21, Adams fretted to James Warren, “I expect, our People when they come to know the Pay of the General officers and others, will grumble. Adams, Paine and I fought against it totis Viribus [with all our might]. But in vain. It is amazingly high. But the southern Genius’s think it is vastly too low.” Massachusetts pushed back, true to its comparatively egalitarian and democratic political culture, but the colonies south of New England carried the day on the issue of army pay rates.²⁹

Adams was further frustrated by the prevalence and persistence among non-Yankee congressmen of vain hopes for reconciliation with the British Crown. On July 5, 1775, Congress adopted the Olive Branch Petition, reaffirming the colonists’ affection for and personal loyalty to King George III, eschewing any desire for independence from the empire, and making a direct appeal for the king to open negotiations for peace and a settlement of colonial grievances. In a letter to James Warren on July 6, Adams wrote that his fellow members of Congress “are much deceived and that We shall have nothing but Deceit and Hostility, Fire, Famine, Pestilence and Sword, from Administration and Parliament.” He had come to consider reconciliation as not only impossible but no longer desirable. In his first overt call for independence, Adams wrote,

We ought immediately to dissolve all Ministerial Tyrannies, and Custom houses, and set up Governments of our own, like that of Connecticut in all the Colonies, confederate together like an indissoluble Band, for mutual defence and open our Ports to all Nations immediately. This is the system that your Friend has aimed at promoting from first to last; But the Colonies are not yet ripe for it. A Bill of Attainder, &c may soon ripen them.³⁰

Unlike the royally appointed governors of Massachusetts and New Hampshire, Connecticut’s governor was elected by the people. In urging the creation of colonial governments based entirely on popular sovereignty and entirely independent of the Crown, as well as a political union of colonies and diplomatic relations with other nations, Adams was offering his own private declaration of independence on July 6, 1775.

Adams had learned enough of statecraft to know that he could only share these views with similarly minded Yankee patriots. It was clear to him that the radical measure of complete independence was required to prevent Britain’s corruption from spreading to America, and yet he observed to Warren that “the Colonies are not ripe for it.” Although chagrined that the mid-Atlantic and southern colonies persisted in the folly of reconciliation, “Yet the Colonies like all Bodies of Men must and will have their Way and their Honour, and even their Whims.” The other colonists would end their attachment to Britain when direct experience with Crown brutality drove them to it, as had already occurred in New England. If

Yankee radicals were to push for independence before the more moderate colonists grasped the necessity of independence, Adams told Warren, the result would be “total Disunion,” with the mid-Atlantic and southern colonies deserting New England and seeking a separate peace with the king’s government.³¹

Adams was nonetheless convinced that Americans’ civic virtue and patriotic attachment to union would sustain the war effort. The same day that he wrote Warren about the necessity of independence and the folly of reconciliation, Adams wrote Warren a second letter relating that ten companies of riflemen from the backcountry of Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Virginia were on the march to Cambridge to support the New England troops in their siege of Boston. Adams was relieved that the South was lending its strength to Massachusetts, but he suspected that one motive for dispatching the backcountry regiments was “a Secrete fear, a Jealousy, that New England will soon be full of Veteran Soldiers, and at length conceive Designs unfavorable to the other Colonies,” which he considered unfounded. Two days later, Adams signed the Olive Branch Petition. As a Yankee continentalist, Adams would continually have to weigh when to stand on New England principles and when to make concessions to regional differences in values, customs, opinions, and passions.³²

Over the nine months following Congress’s adoption of the Olive Branch Petition, war provided the hard schooling necessary for Americans to transcend a narrow provincialism, forsake their attachment to Britain, and lean only on Providence and their own resources. Widely shared hopes for reconciliation faded in the fall of 1775, when King George III declined to receive the petition and declared the patriots to be in a state of rebellion. The Continental Army’s siege of Boston dragged on without decision, while casualties mounted in the American invasion of Quebec. In radical New England, public opinion strongly favored independence, and popular frustration with Congress grew. James Warren wrote John Adams on March 7, 1776, “People cant Account for the hesitancy they Observe. While some Apprehend that you are startled at the measures Already taken, Others wonder why the principles and dictates of Common Sense have not had the same Influence upon the Enlarged minds of their Superiours that they feel on their own, and none can see safety or happiness in a future Connection with B[ritain] void as they are of true policy, Justice or humanity.” In March, General William Howe’s evacuation of British forces from Boston coincided with news from London of Parliament’s Prohibitory Act, by which the Royal Navy’s blockade of Boston was extended to all colonial ports, and all American commerce on the high seas was forfeited to the Crown.³³

On March 23, Adams congratulated General Horatio Gates for the liberation of Boston. He also vented his frustration with those colonists south of New England for whom “Independency is an Hobgoblin, of So frightful Mein, that it would throw a delicate Person into fits to look it in the Face.” He grumbled “that in Politicks the Middle Way is none at all. If We finally fail in this great and glorious Contest, it will be by bewildering ourselves in groping after this middle Way.” Parliamentary hardliners made the “middle way” of reconciliation untenable, pushing a reluctant America toward irrevocable independence. Adams wrote,

I know not whether you have seen the Act of Parliament call’d the restraining Act, or prohibitory Act, or piratical Act, or plundering Act, or Act of Independency, for by all these Titles is it call’d. I think the most apposite is the Act of Independency, for King Lords and Commons have united in Sundering this Country and that I think forever. It is a compleat Dismemberment of the British Empire. It throws thirteen Colonies out of the Royal Protection, levels all Distinctions and makes us independent in Spight of all our supplications and Entreaties.

It may be fortunate that the Act of Independency should come from the British Parliament, rather than the American Congress: But it is very odd that Americans should hesitate at accepting Such a Gift from them.³⁴

March 1776 provided an opening for the advocates of independence to make their case publicly, and Adams prepared to seize the moment.

Severing the colonies from Britain required the extirpation of Crown-appointed governorships from

colonial charter governments like Massachusetts, Virginia, New York, and South Carolina. The next step toward an act of independency by Congress would be a resolution calling on all colonies to adopt new constitutions that omitted all Crown officers. As indicated in his letter to Gates, Adams was at that time working on the problem of crafting constitutions for the American states based entirely on the sovereignty of the people. It was necessary that first “each Colony should establish its own Government, and then a League [of independent states] should be formed, between them all.” The obstacle to this objective was “the Reluctance of the Southern Colonies to Republican Government.” So far from viewing America as New England writ large, he had become keenly sensitive to the dissonance in political culture between egalitarian New England and the more aristocratic societies of the middle and southern colonies. A “Continental Constitution for the whole” of America would, like the state constitutions, need to be “done only on popular Principles and Maxims which are so abhorrent to the Inclinations of the Barons of the south, and the Proprietary Interests in the Middle Colonies.” He resolved to “get us over these obstructions” and work patiently toward the vision of a continental union of independent republics he had first communicated in June 1775 to James Warren. “Thirteen Colonies under such a Form of Government as that of Connecticut, or one, not quite so popular,” he exulted to Gates, “leagued together in a faithfull Confederacy might bid Defiance to all the Potentates of Europe if united against them.”³⁵

Between March 19 and March 27, 1776, Adams hurriedly outlined a model for new state constitutions that were entirely republican in character. The North Carolina legislature was turning its attention to reform of its own government and asked its representatives in Congress to return home and bring ideas for a new constitution with them. Before departing Philadelphia, two North Carolina delegates, William Hooper and John Penn, independently requested recommendations from Adams, so sound by then was his reputation in Congress for political sagacity. He sketched his plan for a model state government in a letter to each, submitted on March 27. At the request of Virginian delegate George Wythe, Adams composed a longer draft, writing a still longer version for Jonathan Dickinson Sergeant of New Jersey in mid-April. One draft (mostly likely the one composed for Wythe) was published as an anonymous pamphlet in Philadelphia on April 22 under the title *Thoughts on Government*. Taking the Massachusetts charter government as his starting place, Adams sketched out a template for new governments for all colonies.³⁶

Adams opened *Thoughts on Government* with a review of first principles. True to the Enlightenment rationalism embedded in his rational dissent, he observed that “the happiness of society is the end of government,” and “All sober enquiries after truth, ancient and modern, Pagan and Christian, have declared that the happiness of man, as well as his dignity consists in virtue.” Contending that the “foundation of every government is some principle or passion in the minds of the people,” he observed that “most governments” depend on the fear of the people, while some better governments appeal to the desire for “honor,” neither of which are conducive to the happiness of society. Looking for guidance on the best form of government in the arguments of such Commonwealth and Real Whig authors as Algernon Sidney, James Harrington, John Locke, and Benjamin Hoadly, Adams concluded that “there is no good government but what is Republican.” The republican form of government is the only one that depends on the people’s virtue and has the people’s happiness as its object. Republics require that the people possess sufficient wisdom and goodness to depute power to “a few of the most wise and good” to serve as their representatives. This representative body, the assembly, “should be in miniature, an exact portrait of the people at large.” The assembly “should think, feel, reason, and act like them.”³⁷

Adams was keenly aware of the limitations of the wisdom and goodness of the people and their elected deputies. A unicameral legislature, he observed, is “liable to all the vices, follies and frailties of an individual” and subject to “fits of humour, starts of passion, flights of enthusiasm, partialities of prejudice, and consequently productive of hasty results and absurd judgments.” In a legislature, as in an individual person, “all these errors ought to be corrected and defects supplied by some controuling power.” In 1776, as in his 1763 *Boston Gazette* essays, Adams found human nature incompatible with centralized government in general and a unicameral legislature in particular. He maintained in *Thoughts on Government*, “I think a people cannot be long free, nor ever happy, whose government is in one Assembly.” His view of human nature as capable of both reason and passion, virtuous restraint and appetitive usurpation, dictated that a constitution provide structural checks and balances to prevent the abuse of power.³⁸

In *Thoughts on Government*, Adams proposed a tripartite government divided into executive, legislative, and judicial branches that resembled the government of Massachusetts under its 1691 charter. He pushed for the concentration of executive power in a governor, armed with a veto over legislation, to serve as a check on the legislative branch. Once the people had formed a representative assembly, the assembly would then elect a smaller legislative body called, as under colonial governments, a council. The assembly and council would in turn elect the governor, who would serve as “an integral party of the legislature” through his use of the veto. Adams was open to an arrangement more like Connecticut’s charter government in which the governor was weaker, but he thought a strong executive necessary for keeping the assembly in check. Adams favored a legislative role for the executive through an absolute veto at least as early as 1766, and he exhorted his fellow congressmen to advocate for that constitutional device in the summer and fall of 1775. As Richard Alan Ryerson observes, Adams’s historical inspiration was less the royal veto of the British constitution—which no monarch had exercised since 1709—than the experience of every American provincial government: all colonial governors had an absolute veto, whether elected by the people or appointed by the Crown.³⁹

The annual election of the governor would give the two legislative branches a check on abuses of executive power and any pretensions to monarchical grandeur. The other executive officers would also be elected by joint ballots of the assembly and council and subject to annual election. Adams considered it critical that every office within his proposed government be elected annually. This provision “will teach them [these great men] the great political virtues of humility, patience, and moderation, without which every man in power becomes a ravenous beast of prey.” Here again, Adams followed the precedent set by the Massachusetts Charter of 1691, by which all officers (except the royally appointed governor) were subject to annual election, a system that had in turn followed the precedent set by the original Massachusetts charter, under which all offices including the governorship were elected annually.⁴⁰

Thoughts on Government was infused with confidence that the American people were capable of responsible self-government and suited for creating and operating independent republics—but only if their governments were crafted in such a way as to keep power in check. In addition to a tripartite division of government, a bicameral legislature, and annual elections, Adams also favored rotation in office, a militia law keeping arms in the hands of “all men,” and life tenures for judges, to keep the judicial branch independent of the governor and legislatures. He again recurred to the example of Massachusetts, under both its provincial charter and original colonial charter, by encouraging all colonies to provide for “the liberal education of youth, especially of the lower class of people.” He thought that creation of a public education system for each colony would be “so extremely wise and useful” that “to a humane and generous mind, no expence for this purpose would be thought extravagant.” As republicanism depends on the rationality and virtue of the common people, Adams doubted that it could be sustained without the education of people too poor to provide for it themselves.⁴¹

Adams looked to over a century of successful self-government in Massachusetts and Connecticut for his recommendations to the other colonies. He was however a Yankee continentalist, not a New England chauvinist. His vision for America put trust in the people and leaders of each colony to craft the government best suited to their own local circumstances and regional differences. When Congress passed a motion on May 10, 1776, calling on the colonies (particularly those whose royal governors had fled) to adopt new forms of government, Adams authored a preamble to clarify the resolution, passed on May 15. His preamble urged the colonies to suppress “every kind of authority under the said Crown” and to exercise “all the powers of government . . . under the authority of the people of the Colonies,” rather than the king. Adams’s resolution was a *de facto* declaration of independence, and by June 7, the pump had been sufficiently primed for a resolution declaring the colonies to be states independent of Crown authority. Contributing modestly to the committee draft of the American Declaration of Independence, his July 1 oration carried the July 2 vote of twelve colonies in favor of independence, with one abstaining. “He was our Colossus on the floor,” Thomas Jefferson recalled of Adams’s speech many years later, possessed of “a power both of thought and of expression which moved us from our seats.”⁴²

Adams had concerns for the future of self-government in the more aristocratic middle and southern colonies, but these concerns did not dim the hope—rooted in his interpretation of human nature, history,

and unfolding events—that the American people were capable of civic virtue and favorable to independence. Adams’s confidence that the provinces outside of New England were ready for republicanism on the model he recommended in *Thoughts on Government* soon proved well placed. Between May and December 1776, Virginia, New Jersey, Maryland, and North Carolina all adopted new state constitutions that included bicameral legislatures, independent judiciaries, and one-person executives armed with the veto, and New York followed this example in 1777.⁴³

When Adams made the prophecy to his wife, that July 2 “will be celebrated, by succeeding Generations” as the birthday of an independent nation, with “Bells, Bonfires and Illuminations from one End of this Continent to other from this Time forward forever more,” he insisted that it was not with irrational “Enthusiasm.”⁴⁴ His vision of America as an independent, continental union was rooted in his view of human nature—both Enlightenment rationalist and dissenting Protestant—and informed by experience: New England’s long record of responsible self-government, Adams’s personal experience as a provincial legislator and congressional delegate, as well as recent military and political developments throughout the colonies. Ten years after the letter to Abigail, with the war won and reform of the constitutional union under consideration, Adams wrote an Irish aristocrat:

It has ever been my hobby-horse to see rising in America an empire of liberty, and a prospect of two or three hundred millions of freemen, without one noble or one king among them. You say it is impossible. If I should agree with you in this, I would still say, let us try the experiment, and preserve our equality as long as we can. A better system of education for the common people might preserve them long from such artificial inequalities as are prejudicial to society, by confounding the natural distinctions of right and wrong, virtue and vice.⁴⁵

This vision of America as “an empire of liberty” rising over the North American continent, and of the common people rising with it, was indeed the great “hobby-horse” of his life, dating from his 1755 letter to Nathan Webb until the final public statement of his life, “Independence forever!”

John Adams first imagined America as New England in macrocosm. By 1775, he had come to see America as a union of republics, regionally diverse but still favorable to republican principles and open to New England’s example. Within the evolution of his political thought from 1755 to 1776, commitment to both continental union and Yankee heritage remained constant. Adams’s idea of America—and of the statecraft befitting a continental-scale union of republics—can be usefully characterized as “Yankee continentalism,” just as Lance Banning understood James Madison as a “Virginia continentalist.” Recently Peter S. Onuf has characterized Thomas Jefferson’s political loyalty as expanding progressively from Virginia to a confederation of self-constituted states, and ultimately to a continental republic, while throughout maintaining Virginia’s destiny as inseparable from that of the union. Provincial continentalism may well be an interpretive concept whose time has come. With a few exceptions like Alexander Hamilton, born on the island of Nevis and never fully assimilated by his adopted New York, the American national leaders styled as the founding fathers did not think of the American union as a centralized nation-state. The cosmopolitan Benjamin Franklin was only too happy to shake the dust of Boston off his feet for the promise of Manhattan and Philadelphia, and he was as much at home in London or Paris as in America. But most of his colleagues—such national statesmen as Adams, Madison, Jefferson, and Washington, along with antifederalists George Mason, Patrick Henry, Samuel Adams, and Mercy Warren—never entirely transcended their prerevolutionary loyalties to province and region (nor saw the need to). They were all provincials. They were all continentalists.⁴⁶

Notes

1. John Adams (hereafter JA) to Abigail Adams, July 3, 1776, L. H. Butterfield et al., eds., *Adams Family Correspondence*, 13 vols. to date (Cambridge, Mass., 1963–), 2:27–28.
2. *Ibid.*, 2:28.
3. Richard Alan Ryerson, *John Adams's Republic: The One, the Few, and the Many* (Baltimore, 2016), 25. For his description of James Madison in 1783 as a “Virginia continentalist,” see Lance Banning, *The Sacred Fire of Liberty: James Madison and the Founding of the Federal Republic* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1995), 42, and Banning, “The Hamiltonian Madison: A Reconsideration,” *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 92 (1984): 26–27.
4. JA to Nathan Webb, October 12 [?], 1755, Robert J. Taylor et al., eds., *Papers of John Adams*, 19 vols. to date (Cambridge, Mass., 1977–), 1:4–5.
5. *Ibid.*, 1:5.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*; Benjamin Franklin, “Observations Concerning the Increase of Mankind, Peopling of Countries, &c,” Leonard W. Labaree et al., eds., *Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, 42 vols. to date (New Haven, Conn., 1961–), 4:227–28, 233.
8. JA, diary, May 16 [17], 1756, L. H. Butterfield, ed., *Diary and Autobiography of John Adams*, 4 vols. (Cambridge, Mass., 1961), 1:27, 34. For origination of the interpretive concept of rational dissent, see Anthony Lincoln, *Some Political and Social Ideas of English Dissent* (Cambridge, U.K., 1938), 30; for an introduction to late twentieth-century scholarship on rational dissent, see Knud Haakonssen, ed., *Enlightenment and Religion: Rational Dissent in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge, U.K., 1996); and for the centrality of Enlightenment rationalism to John Adams’s worldview, see C. Bradley Thompson, *John Adams and the Spirit of Liberty* (Lawrence, Kans., 1998), chap. 1. See also Thompson, *America’s Revolutionary Mind: A Moral History of the American Revolution and the Declaration That Defined It* (New York, 2019), 49–51.
9. JA, diary, July 21, May 11, 1756, Butterfield, ed., *Diary and Autobiography of John Adams*, 1:35, 26. For a recent affirmation of John Adams as a critic of aristocracy, see Luke Mayville, *John Adams and the Fear of American Oligarchy* (Princeton, N.J., 2016).
10. JA to Samuel Quincy, April 22, 1761, Taylor et al., *Papers of John Adams*, 1:48–49.
11. *Ibid.*, 1:50.
12. JA, “An Essay on Man’s Lust for Power, with the Author’s Comment in 1807,” [post August 29, 1763], *ibid.*, 1:82–83; Ryerson, *John Adams’s Republic*, 42–43.
13. JA, “A Dissertation on the Canon and the Feudal Law,” no. 1, August 12, 1765, Taylor et al., eds., *Papers of John Adams*, 1:111; Ryerson, *John Adams’s Republic*, 47–48; Thompson, *John Adams and the Spirit of Liberty*, 48–55.
14. JA, “A Dissertation on the Canon and the Feudal Law,” no. 1, August 12, 1765, Taylor et al., eds., *Papers of John Adams*, 1:111–12.
15. *Ibid.*, 1:112–14.
16. JA, “A Dissertation on the Canon and the Feudal Law,” no. 2, August 19, 1765; no. 3, September 30, 1765; no. 1, August 12, 1765; *ibid.*, 1:111–20.
17. JA, “A Dissertation on the Canon and the Feudal Law,” no. 3, September 30, 1765, *ibid.*, 1:120–21.
18. JA, “A Dissertation on the Canon and the Feudal Law,” no. 4, October 21, 1765, *ibid.*, 1:126–28.
19. *Ibid.*, 1:123.
20. Ryerson, *John Adams’s Republic*, 52, 46.
21. “Appointment of Massachusetts Delegates to the Continental Congress,” June 17, 1774; JA to James Warren, July 17, 1774; JA to Joseph Hawley, June 27, 1774; “Editorial Note,” Taylor et al., eds., *Papers of John Adams*, 2:98–99, 109, 101, 145–50.
22. David McCullough, *John Adams* (New York, 2001), 23; Page Smith, *John Adams*, 2 vols. (Garden City, N.Y., 1962), 1:189; Ryerson, *John Adams’s Republic*, 46.
23. Ryerson, *John Adams’s Republic*, 139–44, 125. For the compelling case that the Massachusetts letters were co-authored by Daniel Leonard and Jonathan Sewall, see Colin Nicolson and Owen Dudley Edwards, *Imaginary Friendship in the American Revolution: John Adams and Jonathan Sewall* (Abingdon, U.K., 2019), chap. 6.
24. “Editorial Note”; JA, “To the Inhabitants of the Colony of Massachusetts-Bay,” March 6, 1775, Taylor et al., eds., *Papers of John Adams*, 2:197, 221–22, 147, 307, 313, 315, 323.
25. JA, “To the Inhabitants of the Colony of Massachusetts-Bay,” March 6, 1775, *ibid.*, 2:320–22, 326; Ryerson, *John Adams’s Republic*, 147. For Adams’s federalism within the Novanglus essays, and the comparison of British America with the relation of England and Scotland before the Act of Union, see Alison L. LaCroix, *The Ideological Origins of American Federalism* (Cambridge, Mass., 2010), 84, 87–88.
26. JA to James Warren, May 21, 1775, Taylor et al., eds., *Papers of John Adams*, 3:11; Ryerson, *John Adams’s Republic*, 154.
27. JA to Moses Gill, June 10, 1775, Taylor et al., eds., *Papers of John Adams*, 3:20–21.
28. JA to Elbridge Gerry, June 18, 1775, *ibid.*, 3:25–26; John Ferling, *John Adams: A Life* (New York, 1992), 127.
29. JA to Elbridge Gerry, June 18, 1775; JA to James Warren, June 21, 1775, Taylor et al., eds., *Papers of John Adams*, 3:25–26, 43.
30. JA to James Warren, July 6, 1775, *ibid.*, 3:62, 63n.

31. Ibid., 3:61.
32. Ibid., 3:63–64.
33. JA to James Warren, March 7, 1776, *ibid.*, 4:45.
34. JA to Horatio Gates, March 23, 1776, *ibid.*, 4:59.
35. Ibid., 4:59–60. For the contrast in social structure between Massachusetts and Virginia in the mid-eighteenth century, and the more egalitarian cast of Massachusetts, see Gordon S. Wood, *Friends Divided: John Adams and Thomas Jefferson* (New York, 2017), 16–20, 28–34.
36. “Editorial Note,” Taylor et al., eds., *Papers of John Adams*, 4:68; Ryerson, *John Adams’s Republic*, 172–74.
37. JA, “Thoughts on Government,” April 1776, Taylor et al., eds., *Papers of John Adams*, 4:86–88.
38. Ibid., 4:88–89.
39. Ibid.; Ryerson, *John Adams’s Republic*, 193–97.
40. JA, “Thoughts on Government,” April 1776, Taylor et al., eds., *Papers of John Adams*, 4:89–90.
41. Ibid., 4:90–91.
42. Ibid., 4:90; Ryerson, *John Adams’s Republic*, 183–86; “Notes on a Conversation with Thomas Jefferson,” Charles M. Wiltse, ed., *The Papers of Daniel Webster: Correspondence*, 5 vols. (Hanover, N.H., 1974), 1:375.
43. Ryerson, *John Adams’s Republic*, 179–80, 203–4.
44. JA to Abigail Adams, July 3, 1776, Butterfield et al., eds., *Adams Family Correspondence*, 2:28.
45. JA to Guy Claude, Comte de Sarsfield, February 3, 1786, Charles Francis Adams, ed., *The Works of John Adams*, 10 vols. (Boston, Mass., 1854), 9:546.
46. For examples of mid-twentieth-century scholarship framing early national politics in terms of a conflict between “nationalism” and states’ rights or “localism,” see Merrill Jensen, *The New Nation: A History of the United States during the Confederation, 1781–1789* (New York, 1950); see also Jackson Turner Main, *The Antifederalists: Critics of the Constitution, 1781–1788* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1961), and E. James Ferguson, “The Nationalists of 1781–1783 and the Economic Interpretation of the Constitution,” *Journal of American History* 56 (1969): 241–61. For a summation of Peter S. Onuf’s contributions to the “federalist” interpretation of early national politics, see Alan Gibson, *Interpreting the Founding: Guide to the Enduring Debates over the Origins and Foundations of the American Republic* (2006; rpt. Lawrence, Kans., 2009), chap. 8, esp. 101–9. For his analysis of the interplay of “Virginia” and “America” in Thomas Jefferson’s constitutional thought, see Onuf, *Jefferson and the Virginians: Democracy, Constitutions, and Empire* (Baton Rouge, La., 2018); see also Arthur Scherr, *Thomas Jefferson’s Image of New England: Nationalism Versus Sectionalism in the Young Republic* (Jefferson, N.C., 2016). For the “Yankee nationalism” of John Quincy Adams, for which John Adams’s Yankee continentalism may be considered the precursor, see Paul E. Teed, *John Quincy Adams: Yankee Nationalist* (Hauppauge, N.Y., 2006).