

Founders Online

VOLUME 1 OF JOHN ADAMS' *A DEFENCE OF THE CONSTITUTIONS OF GOVERNMENT OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA*: EDITORIAL NOTE

Volume 1 of John Adams' *A Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States of America*

[ca. 15 January 1787]

Editorial Note

In early September 1786, John Adams returned to No. 8 Grosvenor Square from a whirlwind summer trip to the Netherlands with wife Abigail ([John Adams Visits the Netherlands, 3 Aug. – 6 Sept.](#), above). Mulling over his political conversations with old friends in the Dutch Patriot Party, which seemed on the verge of victory over the pro-stadholder Orangist Party, Adams plunged into researching and writing the first volume of what became his landmark sourcebook on tripartite federal government: *A Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States of America, Against the Attack of M. Turgot in His Letter to Dr. Price, Dated the Twenty-Second Day of March, 1778*. The full title explains part of Adams' intent, but it does not stretch to encompass all of the work's eventual arguments, which Adams made in three volumes issued in Great Britain and America over the next two years. Wholly immersed in the project that culminated in his "Confession of political Faith," Adams set aside his usual correspondence and trimmed diplomatic duties to the most essential tasks in order to focus on his historical manifesto in support of nascent American federalism. Abigail wrote to Dr. Cotton Tufts in Weymouth on 10 October that her husband "is as much engaged upon the Subject of Government as Plato was when he wrote his *Laws and Republick*" ([to James Warren, 9 Jan. 1787](#), above; [AFC, 7:363, 365–366](#)).

In terms of composition, publication, and reception, the final product was "a Strange Book," as Adams told Richard Cranch on [15 January 1787](#) (above), and so its hasty creation deserves special consideration here. He observed to the English radical Richard Price on 4 February that "it is but an humble tho' laborious office, to collect together so many opinions and examples; but it may point out to my young countrymen the genuine sources of information, upon a subject more interesting to them if possible than to the rest of the world." But the lawyer-turned-diplomat worried that it might be misinterpreted as an enterprise marked by "the temerity of an American demagogue worn out with the cares and vexations of a turbulent life" ([MHS, Procs.](#), 2d ser., 17:364–365 [May 1903]). Addressed to European elites, Adams also hoped the book's ideas would find traction at home, but he correctly suspected that his analysis of foreign aristocracy would draw equal parts ire, confusion, and praise (C. Bradley Thompson, "John Adams and the Science of Politics," *John Adams and the Founding of the Republic*, ed. Richard Alan Ryerson, Boston, 2001, p. 237–265; [Doc. Hist. Ratif. Const.](#), 13:81–90).

Adams originally intended the *Defence* to refute Baron Anne Robert Turgot's claims that Americans lacked strong political architecture, and that the bicameral nature of state legislatures undermined the goal of democracy. In Turgot's letter to Price, the former French finance minister asserted that unicameral legislatures and weak executive power were more democratic, serving to block the rise of special interest groups. Turgot's letter first appeared in print in 1784, three years after his death. But to Adams, it was part of a tidal wave of harmful European assessments of the young United States that painfully misrepresented the new nation's hard-won process of political formation. Adams also worried that Americans increasingly agreed with Turgot's critique.

For years John Adams had been disturbed by European ignorance of America and the published misrepresentations and outright lies that contributed to it. His desire to correct this situation was certainly a factor in motivating him to undertake the *Defence*, but so too was the time that he had available to devote to the task. His diplomatic mission to Britain was effectively at a standstill because the British government refused to engage in any substantive negotiations with him regarding outstanding issues from the 1783 Anglo-American peace treaty so long as the issue of prewar debts was unresolved. The Continental Congress, however, lacked the power under the Articles of Confederation to resolve outstanding Anglo-American issues. Adams, therefore, had little to do. His renewed involvement with Dutch Patriots during his summer sojourn thus reignited his interest in elevating European notions of American prospects at the very moment when he

had ample time to devote to the task. Indeed, in many ways, Adams resumed in the *Defence* arguments that he had made in 1780 in letters to the Amsterdam lawyer Hendrik Calkoen on the nature and durability of American democracy, and which in October he had published in London (vols. [10:99–117](#), [196–252](#); [11:63–68](#), [108](#), [259–260](#)).

At the same time, the American legation in London received a steady trickle of news about agrarian unrest in western New England, stemming from dissatisfaction with the legal system, and compounded by difficulties in paying debts and taxes. This deeply troubled Adams' political faith, particularly since many of the dissidents' grievances were directed at provisions of the 1780 Massachusetts Constitution that he had drafted. Critically, as his correspondence—especially that with Charles Storer, Cranch, Tristram Dalton, Rufus King, and Benjamin Hichborn—throughout this volume demonstrates, Adams prepared the first volume mindful only of the sketchiest details of the major actors and episodes of what became known as Shays' Rebellion. Adams knew of the Massachusetts General Court's failure to settle questions of debt and the shortage of money before its adjournment in July 1786, and he learned of the county conventions' demands just as the *Defence's* first volume entered printer's proofs. But contrary to what he and others would later claim, Adams did not become aware of the more serious and violent mob actions against Massachusetts courts until he began work on the second volume of the *Defence*.

Composing the first volume of the *Defence* was an impulsive and all-consuming project. At first Adams meant to share it with a few friends, but, as Abigail realized, by November 1786 he was "much Swallowed up" in the project and fully "engaged in a work that may prove of no Small utility to our Country" ([AFC](#), [7:395–396](#)). In the autumn of 1786, as John Adams toiled, he adopted the epistolary mode he previously used to popular advantage in his Novanglus letters of 1774–1775 and elsewhere, framing it as a series of letters "sent" to Col. William Stephens Smith between 4 October and 21 December 1786. Adams' opening salvo of the *Defence* pieced together or silently quoted from historical examples, mainly drawn from case studies of Italian republics, to demonstrate that balanced government prevented civil war. Adams wrote that America required such a structure in order to nurture and refine classical ideals of democracy. As a leading federalist he argued in the *Defence* and throughout his political life that American government must distribute power evenly among the democratic, aristocratic, and monarchic/executive branches.

In his consideration of the rise of political parties, and in his broadening of American governmental structure beyond the basic tenets of British constitutionalism, Adams' *Defence* made a provocative argument that resonated with the popular call to reform the weak Articles of Confederation. Adams ended volume 1 with the declaration that "all nations, under all governments, must have parties; the great secret is to controul them: there are but two ways, either by a monarchy and standing army, or by a balance in the constitution. Where the people have a voice, and there is no balance, there will be everlasting fluctuations, revolutions, and horrors, until a standing army, with a general at its head, commands the peace, or the necessity of an equilibrium is made appear to all, and is adopted by all." As a postscript, he printed an extract of his 1782 advice to the Abbé de Mably on writing the history of the American Revolution or, more precisely, his thoughts on why Europeans were uniquely unqualified to write about either American history or American government (vol. [14:165–185](#); [JA, D&A](#), [3:202](#); [JA, Defence of the Const.](#), 1:382, 383–392; C. Bradley Thompson, "John Adams's Machiavellian Moment," *Review of Politics*, 57:389–417 [Summer 1995]; John E. Paynter, "The Rhetorical Design of John Adams's *Defence of the Constitutions ... of America*," *Review of Politics*, 58:531–560 [Summer 1996]).

Via two ships, the *Polly & Nancy* and the *Neptune*, the first volume of the *Defence* reached American shores in mid-April 1787, just as planning began in earnest for a federal Constitutional Convention to be held that spring in Philadelphia. Abigail and others attributed the rush to print to John Adams' growing fury over the Shaysite rebels' attempts to obstruct government business, though news of the first court closures reached him only as the first volume came off the London press. On 17 January 1787 Abigail wrote to John Quincy Adams that "the seditions in Massachusetts induced your Pappa to give to the World a Book which at first he designed only for a few Friends. He thought it was a critical moment and that it might prove usefull to his Countryman and tend to convince them that salutary restraint is the vital principal of Liberty, and that those who from a turbulent restless disposition endeavour to throw of every species of coercion, are the real Enemies of freedom, and forge chains for themselves and posterity" ([Doc. Hist. Ratif. Const.](#), 13:82–84; [AFC](#), [7:443](#)).

Provocative in its patchwork approach to history and political argument, the *Defence* at first garnered favorable attention and positive reviews from his transatlantic circle of intellectuals and statesmen. Dr. John Brown Cutting, a confidant of Adams and Thomas Jefferson, was one of the first to read the *Defence's* initial volume, probably in manuscript form. Cutting praised it in [his 13 December 1786 letter](#), above. By January 1787, the *Defence* was published in London by Charles Dilly, and, throughout 1787, the praise and commentary began to roll in. On 15 January, Adams sent 100 copies to Tufts (from Tufts, 15 May, [Adams](#)

Papers). On Adams' behalf, Tufts presented copies to family members and influential acquaintances like Samuel Williams, John Thaxter, Dalton, Rev. Anthony Wibird, and James Warren; additional volumes were earmarked for Harvard College and the new American Academy of Arts and Sciences (to Tufts, 15 Jan., *Adams Papers*). Adams also sent the *Defence* to John Jay, Tench Coxe, Benjamin Franklin, David Ramsay, Thomas McKean, and Benjamin Rush, among others.

On 20 April, an excerpt was printed in a Boston newspaper, and one Boston bookseller who listed the book on 28 April sold thirty copies within a week. Between 22 June and 7 September, extracts of the *Defence* were published twice weekly in the *Massachusetts Gazette*, while Philadelphia and New York newspapers printed initial portions between 9 May and 6 June. In January 1788, as John and Abigail Adams packed up the American legation to return home, the *Defence's* first volume entered a third edition in Boston. Despite the rapid assembly of his research, Adams eyed his book sales with scholarly satisfaction. "I have rescued from everlasting oblivion, a number of Constitutions and Histories, which, if I had not submitted to the Drudgery, would never have appeared in the English Language," Adams wrote to Tufts on 23 January 1788. "They are the best Models for Americans to Study, in order to show them the horrid precipice that lies before them in order to enable and Stimulate them to avoid it" (*Doc. Hist. Ratif. Const.*, 13:81–90; 14:499–500).

John Adams oversaw the first volume's distribution in Europe, and the *Defence* received key promotions from his network of Enlightenment-era thinkers, including Jefferson, the Marquis de Condorcet, the Duc de La Rochefoucauld, Price, Thomas Brand Hollis, Philip Mazzei, and the Marquis de Lafayette. Throughout the spring and summer of 1787, Price widely praised the *Defence* in letters to Arthur Lee, William Bingham, and Rush. In a letter to Bingham of [May–June 1787], Price, now largely persuaded by Adams' arguments, declared the *Defence* to be the final renunciation of criticisms against American government first launched at him by Turgot: "The chief design of it is to show, that the powers of legislation ought to be lodged in more than one assembly; and he has convinced me so entirely of this, that I wish I had inserted a note on that passage in Mons. Turgot's letter to me, which has occasioned Mr. Adam's book, to express my disapprobation of it." But despite indicating his support for Adams' vision of a tripartite constitutional government, Price remained fairly critical of Americans' ability to implement such a balanced system. "I must believe they will prove at last such an example and benefit to mankind, as I have expected," Price wrote. "But before this can happen, they have much to do" (*The Correspondence of Richard Price*, eds. W. Bernard Peach and D. O. Thomas, 3 vols., Durham, N.C., 1983–1994, 3:120–121, 135–136, 147).

Reactions to the first volume of the *Defence* highlighted the spectrum of intellectual differences that critically supported American political growth. Jefferson disagreed with Adams' depiction of Congress as a diplomatic body, but ultimately concluded in a 23 February letter to Adams that his *Defence* would "do great good in America. It's learning and it's good sense will I hope make it an institute for our politicians, old as well as young." Many, like Ramsay, inhaled the *Defence* in tandem with Adams' replies to Calkoen. "This work is universally admired in Carolina & I flatter myself it will be instrumental in diffusing right notions of government," Ramsay wrote to Adams on 20 September 1787. "I devoutly wish that the sentiments of it were engraven on the heart of every legislator in the United States." Along with Mazzei, Jefferson proposed a French edition to the bookseller Jacques François Froullé, but it was not printed in Paris until 1792 by Jacques Vincent Delacroix, and then as *Défense des constitutions américaines* (Jefferson, *Papers*, 11:118, 176–177; *Doc. Hist. Ratif. Const.*, 13:81–90; *AFC*, 7:365–366; *Amer. Philos. Soc., Trans.*, new ser., 55:114–115 [1965]). For a comprehensive survey of reactions to the work, see appendix C of Charles Warren, *The Making of the Constitution*, Boston, 1928, p. 815–818.

The *Defence's* opening volume served to articulate and disseminate John Adams' belief that Americans must combine precepts of classical republicanism and English constitutionalism in order to build a balanced, tripartite government. The first volume of the *Defence*, which proved formative in shaping and reinforcing public opinion at a crisis point of constitutional reform, also reintroduced Adams to American citizens as an ardent federalist thinker. Volumes 2 and 3 of the *Defence* appeared in August 1787 and January 1788, respectively. Given the work's multivolume scope and the range of reactions that it generated, the editors have chosen to explore the second and third parts in the forthcoming volume 19 of the *Papers of John Adams*. Adams' literary notes, research materials, and drafts of the preface to the first volume and other portions of the entire *Defence* are filmed at M/JA/9, Adams Papers Microfilms, Reel 188. A modern reprint of the *Defence* was issued by Da Capo Press in 1971.

Note: The annotations to this document, and any other modern editorial content, are copyright © The Massachusetts Historical Society. All rights reserved.

[Back to top](#)

SOURCE PROJECT Adams Papers

TITLE Volume 1 of John Adams' *A Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States of America*: Editorial Note

CITE AS "Volume 1 of John Adams' *A Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States of America*: Editorial Note," *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/06-18-02-0290>. [Original source: *The Adams Papers*, Papers of John Adams, vol. 18, *December 1785–January 1787*, ed. Gregg L. Lint, Sara Martin, C. James Taylor, Sara Georgini, Hobson Woodward, Sara B. Sikes, Amanda M. Norton. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016, pp. 544–550.]

The [National Historical Publications and Records Commission \(NHPRC\)](#) is part of the National Archives. Through its grants program, the NHPRC supports a wide range of activities to preserve, publish, and encourage the use of documentary sources, relating to the history of the United States, and research and development projects to bring historical records to the public.

Founders Online is an official website of the U.S. government, administered by the National Archives and Records Administration through the NHPRC, in partnership with the University of Virginia Press, which is hosting this website.

A
D E F E N C E
OF THE
CONSTITUTIONS OF GOVERNMENT
OF THE
UNITED STATES OF AMERICA.

32851
2

BY JOHN ADAMS, LL. D.

MEMBER OF THE ACADEMY OF ARTS AND SCIENCES AT BOSTON.

V O L. ~~II~~ 1

As for us Englishmen, thank Heaven, we have a better sense of government, delivered to us from our ancestors. We have the notion of a public, and a constitution; how a legislative, and how an executive is moulded. We understand weight and measure in this kind, and can reason justly on the balance of power and property. The maxims we draw from hence are as evident as those of mathematics. Our increasing knowledge shews us every day more and more what common sense is in politics.

SHAFTESBURY'S Charact. vol. i. p. 108.

'Tis scarce a quarter of an age since such a happy balance of power was settled between our prince and people, as has firmly secured our hitherto precarious liberties, and removed from us the fear of civil commotions, wars, and violence, either on account of the property of the subject, or the contending titles of the crown.

L O N D O N :

PRINTED FOR C. DILLY, IN THE POULTRY;
AND
JOHN STOCKDALE, PICCADILLY.

M.DCC.LXXXVII.

1787

LETTER	Page
--------	------

ANCIENT ARISTOCRATICAL REPUBLICS.

XXXVI.	<i>Rome</i>	—	—	215
--------	-------------	---	---	-----

ANCIENT MONARCHICAL REPUBLICS.

XXXVII.	<i>Tacitus</i>	—	—	225
---------	----------------	---	---	-----

XXXVIII.	<i>Homer—Phæacia</i>	—	—	232
----------	----------------------	---	---	-----

XXXIX.	<i>Homer—Ithaca</i>	—	—	237
--------	---------------------	---	---	-----

—	<i>Homer</i>	—	—	242
---	--------------	---	---	-----

ANCIENT ARISTOCRATICAL REPUBLICS.

XL.	<i>Lacedæmon</i>	—	—	249
-----	------------------	---	---	-----

ANCIENT DEMOCRATICAL REPUBLICS.

XLI.	<i>Athens</i>	—	—	260
------	---------------	---	---	-----

XLII.	<i>Antalcidas</i>	—	—	286
-------	-------------------	---	---	-----

XLIII.	<i>Acbaia</i>	—	—	295
--------	---------------	---	---	-----

XLIV.	<i>Crete</i>	—	—	305
-------	--------------	---	---	-----

XLV.	<i>Corinth</i>	—	—	308
------	----------------	---	---	-----

XLVI.	<i>Argos</i>	—	—	311
-------	--------------	---	---	-----

XLVII.	<i>Ipbitus</i>	—	—	315
--------	----------------	---	---	-----

XLVIII.	<i>Thebes</i>	—	—	318
---------	---------------	---	---	-----

ANCIENT ARISTOCRATICAL REPUBLICS.

XLIX.	<i>Crotona—Pythagoras</i>	—	—	322
-------	---------------------------	---	---	-----

course of the struggle between the kings and archons, the multitude were so often called upon, and so much courted, that they came by degrees to claim the whole power, and prepared the way, in many of the Grecian states, for another subsequent revolution, from aristocracy to democracy.

Through the whole of Tacitus and Homer, the three orders are visible both in Germany and Greece; and the continual fluctuations of law, the uncertainty of life, liberty, and property, and the contradictory claims and continual revolutions, arose entirely from the want of having the prerogatives and privileges of those orders defined, from the want of independence in each of them, and a balance between them.

L E T T E R X L.

A N C I E N T A R I S T O C R A T I C A L R E P U B L I C S.

L A C E D Æ M O N.

My dear Sir,

FROM the days of Homer to those of Licurgus, the governments in Greece were monarchical in name and pretension, but aristocratical in reality. The archons were impatient of regal government, constantly struggling against their kings; and had prevailed in every other city, except

except Sparta, to abolish the royal authority, and substitute an aristocracy of archons in its place. In Lacedæmon, too, where there were eight-and-twenty archons contending against two kings, they had brought the whole country into the utmost confusion. The circumstance of two kings, which perhaps prolonged the regal power longer in Sparta than in any other city, originated in the fondness of a mother. Aristodemus, one of the descendants of Hercules, to whose share Laconia fell, upon the division of the Peloponnesus, after the return of that family from banishment, leaving twin sons, Euristhenes and Procles; their mother refusing to determine which had the right of primogeniture, it was agreed that both should succeed to the crown with equal authority, and that the posterity of each should inherit. The nobles took advantage of all the jealousies which arose between the two families, obliged each to court them, and from time to time to make them concessions, until the royal authority was lost; and as the archons could not agree, each party now began to court the people, and universal anarchy prevailed.

Lycurgus, of the family of Procles, and only in the tenth descent from Hercules, succeeded his brother Polidectes; but being told his brother's widow was with child, he declared himself protector only, and resigned the crown. Such a disinterested indifference to a crown in any one of royal or noble blood, was so unexampled in that age, that no wonder it was much admired and very popular. The ambitious princess, his sister, offered to marry him, and remove out of his way the only competitor, by procuring an abortion. He deceived her by counterfeited tenderness; and diverted her from the thoughts of an abortion, by promising

promising to take the disposition of the child upon himself when it should be born. The infant was sent to him, when at supper with the principal magistrates: he took it in his arms, and cried, "A king, Spartans, is born to you," and placed it in his own seat. The company were touched at the tenderness of the scene, and fell into a transport of enthusiasm, both of piety to the blood of Hercules, and admiration of the disinterested integrity of Lycurgus, who, like an able statesman, perpetuates the memory of the event, and the joy at it, by the name with which, upon the spot, he christens the boy, Charilaus, *the peoples joy*. But all this exalted merit, added to his acknowledged divine descent, and the undoubted possession of royal power, were not sufficient to over-awe the jealousy of the nobles, a strong party of whom joined the irritated queen and her brother, and raised continual factions against him. Weary of cabals, and stimulated with a thirst for knowledge, he determined to travel; visited Crete and Egypt, the two sources of the theology and policy of Greece; and brought home with him, on his return to his own country, Thales the poet, and the writings of Homer, with the resolution of adopting the martial discipline and political liberty which he read in the poet, and had seen exemplified in Crete. Nothing could be better calculated than his two poets, to inspire the nation with that enthusiasm which he wanted, and confirm the belief, that kings were from Jupiter, and beloved by him, excepting the response of the oracle, which he took care to procure: "Welcome, Lycurgus, to this happy place; thou favourite of Heaven! I stand in doubt whether I shall pronounce thee god or man: inclining still to think thou art a god!"—Herodotus.

The