

LESSONS ON COMMUNITY AND THE INSTITUTIONS THAT SUSTAIN THEM

John Adams possessed a rather negative view of human nature and aimed to establish governments that channeled ambition and passion away from decision making and power. Governments could not rely on man's inherent virtue to defend the public good. But virtue must be taught, and institutions must do this teaching. They must buttress republican society at every turn. And government must play a role in supporting these institutions.

As our nation has grown, so has the number of institutions that guard the general welfare and shape the public good. Through funding and legislation, government continues to play a role in supporting them. But this relationship, seen vividly in issues of separation of church and state, often creates tension.

What institutions did Adams define as the most essential to this mission? What unique role did each have in shaping the ideology of citizens? What is the proper relation between government and these institutions, then and now?

Document 1

In this letter to Abigail, John Adams reflects upon the institutions and factors that make a community strong, and have helped New England communities, in particular, thrive and sustain the spirit of liberty, despite the oppressive force of British rule.

Which of these institutions seems most important? How do they all complement each other? "English blood" tops his list. Why? Adams isn't racist is he? How might having a common heritage help to keep a community tightly knit?

Letter from John Adams to Abigail Adams, 29 October 1775

There is, in the human Breast, a social Affection, which extends to our whole Species. Faintly indeed; but in some degree. The Nation, Kingdom, or Community to which We belong is embraced by it more vigorously. It is stronger still towards the Province to which we belong, and in which We had our Birth. It is stronger and stronger, as We descend to the County, Town, Parish, Neighbourhood, and Family, which We call our own. -- And here We find it often so powerfull as to become partial, to blind our Eyes, to darken our Understandings and pervert our Wills.

It is to this Infirmary, in my own Heart, that I must perhaps attribute that local Attachment, that partial Fondness, that overweening Prejudice in favour of New England, which I feel very often and which I fear sometimes, leads me to expose myself to just Ridicule.

New England has in many Respects the Advantage of every other Colony in America, and indeed of every other Part of the World, that I know any Thing of.

1. The People are purer English Blood, less mixed with Scotch, Irish, Dutch, French, Danish, Sweedish &c. than any other; and descended from Englishmen too who left Europe, in purer Times than the present and less tainted with Corruption than those they left behind them.
2. The Institutions in New England for the Support of Religion, Morals and Decency, exceed any other, obliging every Parish to have a Minister, and every Person to go to Meeting &c.
3. The public Institutions in New England for the Education of Youth, supporting Colledges at the public Expence and obliging Towns to maintain Grammar schools, is not equalled and never was in any Part of the World.
4. The Division of our Territory, that is our Counties into Townships, empowering Towns to assemble, choose officers, make Laws, mend roads, and twenty other Things, gives every Man an opportunity of shewing and improving that Education which he received at Colledge or at school, and makes Knowledge and Dexterity at public Business common.
5. Our Laws for the Distribution of Intestate Estates occasions a frequent Division of landed Property and prevents Monopolies, of ~~Lands~~ Land.

But in opposition to these We have laboured under many Disadvantages. The exorbitant Prerogatives of our Governors &c. which would have overborn our Liberties, if it had not been opposed by the five preceding Particulars.

John Adams to Abigail Adams, 29 October 1775, "There is, in the human breast. . ." [electronic edition], *Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive*, Massachusetts Historical Society, <http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/>.

Document 2

Eleven years later, with the war against the British behind him and the ratification of a new constitution ahead, Adams wrote again about four of the most influential institutions that helped Massachusetts lead and win the fight against the British. The letter was written to a Frenchman who was considering writing about United States history.

How does Adams suggest that these institutions are exceptional to Americans? What role did each of these institutions play in shaping a revolutionary society? In what ways might each serve as "foundations of the liberty, happiness, and prosperity of the people?" in any republic, or in any community? Under what conditions might any of these institutions serve to undermine the success of a republic?

John Adams, *Letter to the Abbe de Mably, on the Proper Method of Treating American History, 1782* [excerpt]

Permit me, sir, before I finish this letter, to point at a key to all this history. There is a general analogy in the governments and characters of all the thirteen states; but it was not till the debates and the war began in Massachusetts Bay, the principal province of New England, that their primitive institutions produced their first effect. Four of these institutions ought to be amply investigated and maturely considered by any person who wishes to write with correct information upon this subject; for they have produced a decisive effect, not only in the first determinations of the controversies in writing, and the first debates in council, and the first resolutions to resist in arms, but also by the influence they had on the minds of the other colonies, by giving them an example to adopt more or less the same institutions and similar measures. The four institutions intended are:

1. The towns or districts.
2. The congregations.
3. The schools.
4. The militia.

The towns are certain extents of country, or districts of territory, into which Massachusetts Bay, Connecticut, New Hampshire, and Rhode Island, are divided. These towns contain upon an average, say, six miles or two leagues square. The inhabitants who live within these limits are formed by law into corporations, or bodies politic, and are invested with certain powers and privileges, as, for example, to repair the great roads or highways, to support the poor, to choose their selectmen, constables, collectors of taxes, and above all, their representatives in the legislature; as also, the right to assemble, whenever they are summoned by their selectmen, in their town halls, there to deliberate upon the public affairs of the town, or to give instructions to their representatives in the legislature. The consequences of these institutions have been, that the inhabitants, having acquired from their infancy the habit of discussing, of deliberating, and of judging of public affairs, it was in these assemblies of towns or districts that the sentiments of the people were formed in the first place, and their resolutions were taken from the beginning to the end of the disputes and the war with Great Britain.

2. The congregations are religious societies, which comprehend the whole people. Every district contains a parish or religious congregation. In general, they have but one, though some of them have several. Each parish has a temple for public worship, and a minister, maintained at the public expense. The constitutions of these congregations are extremely popular, and the clergy have little influence or authority beyond that which their own piety, virtues, and talents naturally give them. They are chosen by the people of their parishes, and receive their ordinations from the neighboring clergy. They are all married, have families, and live with their parishioners in an intimate and perfect friendship. They visit the sick; they are charitable to the poor; they solemnize marriages and funerals, and preach twice every Sunday. The smallest imputation on their moral character would destroy their influence, and ruin them forever. They are, therefore, wise, virtuous, and pious men; their sentiments are generally conformable to those of their people, and they are jealous friends of liberty.

3. There are schools in every town, established by an express law of the colony. Every town containing sixty families, is obliged, under a penalty, to maintain constantly a school and a schoolmaster, who shall teach his scholars reading, writing, arithmetic, and the rudiments of the Latin and Greek languages. All the children of the inhabitants, the rich as well as the poor, have a right to go to these public schools. There, are formed the candidates for admission as students into the colleges at Cambridge, New Haven, Princeton, and Dartmouth. In these colleges are educated future masters for these schools, future ministers for these congregations, doctors of law and medicine, and magistrates and officers for the government of the country.

4. The militia comprehends the whole people. By virtue of the laws of the country, every male inhabitant between sixteen and sixty years of age, is enrolled in a company, and a regiment of militia completely organized with all its officers. He is enjoined to keep always in his house, and at his own expense, a firelock in good order, a powder horn, a pound of powder, twelve flints, four-and-twenty balls of lead, a cartridge box, and a knapsack; so that the whole country is ready to march for its own defence upon the first signal of alarm. These companies and regiments are obliged to assemble at certain times in every year, under the orders of their officers, for the inspection of their arms and ammunition, and to perform their exercises and manoeuvres.

Behold, sir, a little sketch of the four principal sources of that prudence in council and that military valor and ability, which have produced the American Revolution, and which I hope will be sacredly preserved as the foundations of the liberty, happiness, and prosperity of the people.

John Adams to the Abbe de Mably, 1782, in *The Works of John Adams : Second President of the United States*, Vol. 5, ed. Charles Francis Adams (Freeport, New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1969), 494-496.

Document 3

Shortly before becoming president, John Adams wrote these short lines about Christianity in his diary. In what ways is Adams suggesting that Christianity is uniquely suited to transmit values essential to citizens of a republic?

John Adams's Diary, 14 August 1796

August 14. 1796. Sunday.

The Weather hot and dry.

One great Advantage of the Christian Religion is that it brings the great Principle of the Law of Nature and Nations, Love your Neighbour as yourself, and do to others as you would that others should do to you, to the Knowledge, Belief and Veneration of the whole People. Children, Servants, Women and Men are all Professors in the science of public as well as private Morality. No other Institution for Education, no kind of political

Discipline, could diffuse this kind of necessary Information, so universally among all Ranks and Descriptions of Citizens. The Duties and Rights of The Man and the Citizen are thus taught, from early Infancy to every Creature. The Sanctions of a future Life are thus added to the Observance of civil and political as well as domestic and private Duties. Prudence, Justice, Temperance and Fortitude, are thus taught to be the means and Conditions of future as well as present Happiness.

John Adams diary 46, 6 August 1787 - 10 September 1796, 2 July - 21 August 1804 [electronic edition]. *Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive*. Massachusetts Historical Society. <http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/>

Document 4

In the Massachusetts State Constitution, which he penned, Adams stated the mission of schools. His aim is high. In what ways do schools, according to Adams, support republican values? To what extent does this reflect your experience?

The Massachusetts State Constitution. Chapter V, Section II. The Encouragement of Literature, etc., 1780

Wisdom, and knowledge, as well as virtue, diffused generally among the body of the people, being necessary for the preservation of their rights and liberties; and as these depend on spreading the opportunities and advantages of education in the various parts of the country, and among the different orders of the people, it shall be the duty of legislatures and magistrates, in all future periods of this commonwealth, to cherish the interests of literature and the sciences, and all seminaries of them; especially the university at Cambridge, public schools and grammar schools in the towns; to encourage private societies and public institutions, rewards and immunities, for the promotion of agriculture, arts, sciences, commerce, trades, manufactures, and a natural history of the country; to countenance and inculcate the principles of humanity and general benevolence, public and private charity, industry and frugality, honesty and punctuality in their dealings; sincerity, good humor, and all social affections, and generous sentiments among the people.

Constitution of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, Chap. V, Sec. II, "The Encouragement of Literature, etc.", www.mass.gov/legis/const.htm.

Document 5

Adams had written about the historical abuse of power by the clergy; the laws of the European churches (especially the Catholic Church) had too often cast individuals into servitude. Despite this historical lesson, Article III of the state constitution clearly indicates Adams's commitment to religion as a transmitter of knowledge and values. To more clearly draw a line between church and state, however, the state Constitution was

later amended to dissolve the financial and legal relationship between the state and the parishes.

Why is Adams so emphatic that the people – through their legislature – have the ability to establish and fund churches? What might have been gained or lost when this capacity was taken from the legislature?

The Massachusetts State Constitution. Part the First. A Declaration of the Rights of the Inhabitants of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. Article III, 1780

As the happiness of a people, and the good order and preservation of civil government, essentially depend upon piety, religion and morality; and as these cannot be generally diffused through a community, but by the institution of the public worship of God, and of public instructions in piety, religion and morality: Therefore, to promote their happiness and to secure the good order and preservation of their government, the people of this commonwealth have a right to invest their legislature with power to authorize and require, and the legislature shall, from time to time, authorize and require, the several towns, parishes, precincts, and other bodies politic, or religious societies, to make suitable provision, at their own expense, for the institution of the public worship of God, and for the support and maintenance of public Protestant teachers of piety, religion and morality, in all cases where such provision shall not be made voluntarily.

And the people of this commonwealth have also a right to, and do, invest their legislature with authority to enjoin upon all the subjects an attendance upon the instructions of the public teachers aforesaid, at stated times and seasons, if there be any on whose instructions they can conscientiously and conveniently attend.

Provided, notwithstanding, that the several towns, parishes, precincts, and other bodies politic, or religious societies, shall, at all times, have the exclusive right of electing their public teachers, and of contracting with them for their support and maintenance.

And all moneys paid by the subject to the support of public worship, and of the public teachers aforesaid, shall, if he require it, be uniformly applied to the support of the public teacher or teachers of his own religious sect or denomination, provided there be any on whose instructions he attends; otherwise it may be paid towards the support of the teacher or teachers of the parish or precinct in which the said moneys are raised.

Any every denomination of Christians, demeaning themselves peaceably, and as good subjects of the commonwealth, shall be equally under the protection of the law: and no subordination of any one sect or denomination to another shall ever be established by law.

Constitution of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, Part the First, "A Declaration of the Rights of the Inhabitants of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts," Article III, www.mass.gov/legis/const.htm.

Putting it all together

1. *Consider some of the key institutions that these documents refer to – schools, churches, local governments, and militias – how does each of these serve to strengthen the bonds of a community, its citizens to each other? How could they serve to undermine a community?*
2. *What responsibilities is Adams suggesting – implicitly or explicitly – that these institutions have to society? What responsibilities might Adams say that individuals have toward these institutions?*
3. *In what way does Adams suggest that these healthy, republican-minded American institutions are especially within the grasp of Americans because of their country's unique history and place in the world? What do you know about the nation's history that supports or refutes this?*
4. *Adams suggests that homogeneous citizens help to unify a community – having a common religion or ethnicity, for instance. Indeed, New England in Adams's time was a relatively homogenous society. In what ways might strong institutions serve to mitigate any potential divisiveness of a heterogeneous community?*
5. *How does the way institutions serve a community differ from how they serve a larger republic?*
6. *What other institutions would you say are essential to shaping an individual and preparing him or her for citizenship?*

THE ISSUE: TOWN MEETING

Adams stressed the importance of local government in New England. Because of this institution, including its unique town meetings, the public “acquired from their infancy the habit of discussing, of deliberating, and of judging of public affairs.” Of course, town meetings still exist in most of New England and in other parts of the nation.

But when only ten percent of a town’s population turns up for town meeting, one may question how well it functions to create the public debate of issues, investment in community, and disposition that supports republican governments.

Examine the following sources:

“The New England Town Meeting” New Rules Project, Institute for Local Self-Reliance, <http://www.newrules.org/gov/townmtg.html>

Christopher Shea, “Real Democracy.” *The Boston Globe*. 25 January 2004.
[accessed 12 December 2007]
http://www.boston.com/news/globe/ideas/articles/2004/01/25/real_democracy_1075225901

Robert I. Rotberg, “For democracy, smaller is better.” *Christian Science Monitor*, 3 February 2004, <http://www.csmonitor.com/2004/0203/p16s01-bogn.html>

Use these sources to help answer the following questions:

- 1. What seem to be the inherent strengths and weaknesses of town meeting?*
- 2. In what ways are these weaknesses a function of contemporary, industrial life – factors that a town may not have faced at the turn of the eighteenth century?*
- 3. How do the articles support Adams’s claim that such institutions create a public that “acquire(s) from their infancy the habit of discussing, of deliberating, and of judging of public affairs”?*
- 4. Adams at once praised the deliberative nature of town meeting and distrusted unicameral bodies because of the ability of the few to sway “the weak.” What might he have said about Bryan’s views and the state of town meeting today?*
- 5. What do you think about Rotberg’s assertion that Iraq and Afghanistan could use a good dose of New England town meeting? What institutions and historical traditions in those two nations might be at odds with the values that Adams trusted town meetings to inculcate?*

SERVICE-LEARNING CONNECTIONS: COMMUNITY AND INSTITUTIONS

The following list contains ideas that teachers and students might like to pursue as service learning extensions for this lesson. Teachers should make certain students have ample time and prompting to reflect on the significance of their service and how John Adams might have considered their work. Students and teachers could:

- Study the Town Warrant and the issues at stake in the next election. Then, sponsor a public forum on particular issues, to be televised on local cable.
- Publish a booklet - *Town Meeting for Dummies* - that explains how town meeting works and the issues at stake at the next town meeting. These could be distributed to students and citizens. Publish these booklets in another language if this is identified as a need.
- Examine the school's mission statement, student handbook and curriculum to assess the extent to which the school, in Adams's words, "inculcate(s) the principles of humanity and general benevolence, public and private charity, industry and frugality, honesty and punctuality in their dealings." Report these findings to the student body, administration, or school board.
- Help the school or an elementary school sponsor a *Day of Cultural Understanding*. Diversity and cultural awareness workshops could serve to build a closer community. As a central theme, stress that building community through education "among the different orders of the people," is "necessary for the preservation of their rights and liberties."
- Research President Bush's "Faith-Based Initiative" bearing in mind local community needs. Advise a local religious organization on the initiative and how they might use funding to help meet this local need.