

Chapter 76 -- Overview Of John Quincy Adams Term In Office



Dates:
1825-1829

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Time: 1767-1848

John Quincy Adams: Personal Profile



While John Quincy Adams's track record of public service qualifies him to become a superb President, his temperament proves ill-suited to the executive role, and his lasting fame will rest on his remarkable service both before his term, as Secretary of State, and after, when he returns to the House of Representatives as the first political crusader against the institution of slavery.

JQA, as he calls himself, is born in Braintree, Massachusetts, on July 11, 1767, the second child and first son of John and Abigail Adams. His father is a fifth generation American, a farmer and lawyer, and already caught up in the politics surrounding resistance to the British Stamp Act of 1765. His mother is a stern Puritan through and through, who micromanages every aspect of the boy's life into adulthood, sparking a resentment that ends with his failure to attend her sickbed and funeral in 1818.

John Quincy Adams (1767-1848)

In the Calvinist tradition, Abigail teaches JQA that personal discipline is essential to salvation, and that each day must be parceled out in rigid fashion to meet that end: up before dawn, exercise, reading the Bible, duties until evening, diary entries to record achievements and failings, no more than 4-5 hours of sleep. Both parents also burden the youth with elevated expectations around public service, his father demanding that he:

Become a guardian of the laws, liberty and religion of your country.

Predictably the youth suffers early on from a sense of guilt and failure. At age seven, he writes to his parents:

I hope...you will have no occasion to be ashamed of me.

Unlike his two brothers, Charles and Thomas, who wilt under parental pressure into dissolution and alcohol, JQA is blessed with enough raw talent to bear up. This includes enormous intellectual capacity, which, by ten has him mastering Greek and Latin, on his way to fluency in six other languages besides English. By fifteen, he devours the historical classics (Hume, Macaulay, Gibbons, Caesar's *Commentaries* and Cicero's *Oratories* in Latin), masters Adam Smith's economic tome, *Wealth of Nations*, allows himself to indulge in literature from Shakespeare to the English poets. He loves school and is settling into life as a student in 1778.

His plans evaporate, however, when his father is sent by George Washington to join Ben Franklin in Paris as joint ministers seeking French support in the Revolutionary War..

John and Abigail decide that JQA's worldview will be broadened if goes along with his father. At age twelve, he boards a ship for what will be the first in a long series of back and forth stints in Europe. These will propel him before his time into adulthood, make him America's leading diplomat, and set the stage for his presidency.

At fifteen he is an aide in St. Petersburg translating the court language (French) for Ambassador Francis Dana and befriending the future Tsar, Alexander I. Three years later he is back home, enrolling at Harvard, then graduating in 1787, opening a law practice, and falling in love, only to have this vetoed by his mother, who says he is not financially prepared to support a wife.

In 1794, with backing from his father, then Vice-President, JQA is named Minister to the Netherlands. He is 27 years old at the time, but already a recognized figure in Europe. On a visit to Britain, he meets English-born Louisa Johnson, who becomes his wife in 1797. Abigail calls her "the Siren," and the two remain forever at odds.

As President, his father names him Minister to Prussia, and he serves there from 1797 to 1801. With Jefferson now in office, JQA returns to Boston to resume his law practice, but that is again short-lived. Federalist friends convince him to run for state senator and then, in 1802 for the U.S. House. He loses this election, but is chosen by the state legislature in 1803 to serve as U.S. Senator.

During his term, he commits political suicide within the Federalist Party by backing two controversial acts by Jefferson: the 1803 Louisiana Purchase and the 1807 Trade Embargo on British imports. When he caucuses with the Democrat-Republicans in selecting Madison to run in 1808, the Federalists disown him for good, and he resigns his seat in 1808. He continues to teach logic at Harvard University until 1809, when Madison chooses him to be America's first Minister to Russia. He remains there for five years before heading to London to 1814 to join Speaker Henry Clay and Treasury Secretary Gallatin in negotiating the Treaty of Ghent, which ends the War of 1812. He stays there until 1817 when Monroe appoints him Secretary of State.

Adams is finally back home after eight straight years abroad. He and Louisa have had four children, a daughter who dies in infancy in Russia and three sons, two who descend into alcoholism and one, Charles Francis, who will become an accomplished public servant. Monroe exhibits great confidence in his chief diplomat, and Adams responds in kind. His many achievements include the Adams-Onis/Transcontinental Treaty of 1818 and the framework known as the Monroe Doctrine, announcing America's diplomatic stance as a world power.

Throughout the years Adams retains the steely discipline imposed on him as a child. He works from morning to night, allowing himself only infrequent breaks for a swim in the Potomac, a game of billiards, a cultural event.

Adams's ascent to the presidency at age 58 is in many ways a fulfillment of the awesome expectations placed upon him by his mother and father. He arrives prepared with vast experience as a diplomat, high moral principles and a commitment to advancing the welfare of the nation.

As a presidential politician, however, he will prove even more inept than his namesake.

His term in office leaves him vastly disappointed with his achievements, and this is followed by a decisive loss to Jackson in 1828. At this point, most men would simply fade away from the public stage. But not JQ Adams.

In 1831 neighbors convince him to run again for the House, and he will serve there for almost 17 years until his death from a cerebral hemorrhage suffered in the chamber in 1848. This "second act" for the former President far outshines what he was able to accomplish in the White House.

Most notably he emerges here as the outright champion of the move to free all slaves and find ways to assimilate them into American society. His commitment to this cause brings the taboo subject of slavery into the people's House and sets the stage for all future political efforts to end it through legislation. In this quest he is every inch the Puritan son seeking the "holiest rights of humanity" for all Americans.

They look down upon the simplicity of a Yankee's manners, because he has no habits of overbearing like theirs and cannot treat negroes like dogs. It is among the evils of slavery that it taints the very sources of moral principle. It establishes false estimates of virtue and vice: for what can be more false and heartless than this doctrine which makes the first and holiest rights of humanity to depend upon the color of the skin?

Time: 1776-1861

Sidebar: The U.S Diplomatic Corps

John Quincy Adams’ years as a U.S. diplomat during the nation’s earliest and often most hazardous period put him in the company of other important figures who served in London and Paris, up through the Civil War.

Included here were five who became President (John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, James Monroe, JQ Adams, Martin Van Buren, and James Buchanan), two Vice-Presidents (William King and George Dallas), and a host of other Cabinet officers and congressional leaders.

U.S. Ambassadors to Great Britain

Years	Name	Appointed By	Party	Highest Political Office
1785-1788	John Adams	Washington	Federalist	President (1797-1801)
1789-1791	Vacant			
1792-1796	Thomas Pinckney	Washington	Federalist	Gov/SC – Prez Nominee
1796-1803	Rufus King	Washington	Federalist	Senate/NY – Prez Nom.
1803-1807	James Monroe	Jefferson	Dem-Rep	President (1817-1825)
1808-1811	William Pinkney	Jefferson	Dem-Rep	Senate/Md
1812-1813	Vacant			
1814-1817	John Q.Adams	Madison	Dem-Rep	President (1825-1829)
1818-1825	Richard Rush	Monroe	Dem-Rep	Sec. of Treasury
1825-1826	Rufus King	JQ Adams	Federalist	Senate/NY – Prez Nom.
1826-1827	Albert Gallatin	JQ Adams	Dem-Rep	Sec. of Treasury
1828-1829	James Barbour	JQ Adams	Dem-Rep	Sec. of War
1829-1831	Louis McLane	Jackson	Democrat	Sec. of State
1831-1832	Martin Van Buren	Jackson	Democrat	President (1837-1841)
1832-1836	Aaron Vail (charge)	Jackson	Democrat	--
1836-1841	Andrew Stevenson	Jackson	Democrat	Speaker of US House
1841-1845	Edward Everett	Van Buren	Democrat	Secretary of State
1845-1846	Louis McLane	Polk	Democrat	Sec. of War
1846-1849	George Bancroft	Polk	Democrat	Sec. of the Navy
1849-1852	Abbot Lawrence	Taylor	Whig	US House
1852-1853	Joseph R. Ingersoll	Fillmore	Whig	US House
1853-1856	James Buchanan	Pierce	Democrat	President (1857-1861)
1856-1861	George Dallas	Pierce	Democrat	Vice-President (1845-1849)
1861-1868	Charles F. Adams	Lincoln	Republican	US House

U.S. Ambassadors to France

Years	Name	Appointed By	Party	Highest Political Office
1776-1785	Benjamin Franklin	Washington	Indep.	Postmaster General
1785-1789	Thomas Jefferson	Washington	Dem-Rep	President (1801-1809)
1790-1792	William Short	Washington	Federalist	---
1792-1794	Gouvernor Morris	Washington	Federalist	US Senate
1794-1796	James Monroe	Washington	Dem-Rep	President (1817-1825)
1796-1797	Chas. C. Pinckney	Washington	Federalist	Presidential Nominee
1801-1804	Robert Livingston	Jefferson	Dem-Rep	---
1804-1810	John Armstrong	Jefferson	Dem-Rep	Sec. of War
1811-1812	Joel Barlow	Madison	Dem-Rep	---
1813-1815	William Crawford	Madison	Dem-Rep	Sec. of Treasury/Prez Nom

1816-1823	Albert Gallatin	Madison	Dem-Rep	Sec. of Treasury
1824-1829	James Brown	Monroe	Dem-Rep	US Senate
1829-1833	William Rives	Jackson	Democrat	US Senate
1833	Levett Harris	Jackson	Democrat	---
1833-1836	Edward Livingston	Jackson	Democrat	Sec. of State
1836-1842	Lewis Cass	Jackson	Democrat	Sec. of State/Prez Nominee
1844-1846	William King	Tyler	Democrat	Vice-President (1853)
1847-1849	Richard Rush	Polk	Democrat	Sec. of Treasury
1849-1853	William Rives	Taylor	Whig	US Senate
1853-1859	John Mason	Pierce	Democrat	US Attorney General
1860-1861	Charles Faulkner	Buchanan	Democrat	US House
1861-1865	John Bigelow	Lincoln	Republican	---

March 4, 1825

Adams's Inaugural Address Announces His Vision For America

Chief Justice John Marshall administers the oath of office to Adams in the House chamber. His hand is on a law book at the time, and he is the first president who substitutes modern trousers for the knee-high breeches favored in colonial times. His inaugural speech is 2915 words long, slightly briefer than Monroe, more than twice that of Madison.

In traditional fashion, Adams begins the speech by recognizing his solemn duties and his commitment to the Constitution, while offering praise for America's stellar progress over its first half century.

.. I appear, my fellow-citizens, in your presence...to bind myself by the solemnities of religious obligation to faithful performance of the duties allotted to me in the station to which I have been called....In unfolding to my countrymen the principles by which I shall be governed in the fulfillment of those duties my first resort will be to that Constitution which I shall swear to the best of my ability to preserve, protect, and defend.

It has promoted the lasting welfare of that country so dear to us all...Liberty and law have marched hand in hand. All the purposes of human association have been accomplished...at a cost little exceeding in a whole generation the expenditure of other nations in a single year...Such is the unexaggerated picture of our condition under a Constitution founded upon the republican principle of equal rights.

He then turns to partisan politics, likely prompted by the divisive election. He argues that while the emergence of "two great political parties" has at times "shaken the Union to its center," the cause of the "strife" has been laid to rest with the end of the European wars. (This will quickly prove to be a naive wish on his part!))

...From the experience of the past we derive instructive lessons for the future. Of the two great political parties which have divided the opinions and feelings of our country, the candid and the just will now admit that both have contributed splendid talents, spotless integrity, ardent patriotism, and disinterested sacrifices to the formation and administration of this Government, and that both have required a liberal indulgence for a portion of human infirmity and error.

The revolutionary wars of Europe... excited a collision of sentiments and of sympathies which kindled all the passions and embittered the conflict of parties till the nation was involved in war and the Union was shaken to its center...With the catastrophe in which the wars of the French Revolution terminated, and our own subsequent peace with Great Britain, this baneful weed of party strife was uprooted.

From that time no difference of principle, connected either with the theory of government or with our intercourse with foreign nations, has existed or been called forth in force sufficient to sustain a continued combination of parties or to give more than wholesome animation to public sentiment or legislative debate.

Next comes a litany of principles he intends to embrace during his presidency.

Our political creed is that the will of the people is the source...of all legitimate government upon earth; that the best...guaranty against the abuse of power consists in.. the frequency of popular elections; that the General Government of the Union and the separate governments of the States are all sovereignties of limited powers...; that the firmest security of peace is the preparation during peace of the defenses of war; that a rigorous economy and accountability of public expenditures should guard against... the burden of taxation; that the military should be kept in strict subordination to the civil power; that the freedom of the press and of religious opinion should be inviolate; that the policy of our country is peace....

These principles will continue to work for the nation, if only the remnants of party rancor can be laid aside.

There still remains one effort of magnanimity, one sacrifice of prejudice and passion, to be made by the individuals throughout the nation who have heretofore followed the standards of political party. It is that of discarding every remnant of rancor against each other, of embracing as countrymen and friends, and of yielding to talents and virtue alone that confidence which in times of contention for principle was bestowed only upon those who bore the badge of party communion.

As a lifelong astute diplomat, Adams is well aware of the sources of rancor, even if he is overly optimistic about overcoming them. He properly identifies “geographical divisions” as one “dangerous” concern.

The collisions of party spirit which originate in speculative opinions or in different views of administrative policy are in their nature transitory. Those which are founded on geographical divisions, adverse interests of soil, climate, and modes of domestic life are more permanent, and therefore, perhaps, more dangerous.

In turn, he senses renewed tensions around the balance of power between the federal and state governments, and articulates his view of the guidelines laid out in the Constitution.

It holds out to us a perpetual admonition to preserve alike and with equal anxiety the rights of each individual State in its own government and the rights of the whole nation in that of the Union. Whatsoever is of domestic concernment, unconnected with the other members of the Union or with foreign lands, belongs exclusively to the administration of the State governments. Whatsoever directly involves the rights and interests of the federative fraternity or of foreign powers is of the resort of this General Government. The duties of both are obvious in the general principle, though sometimes perplexed with difficulties in the detail. To respect the rights of the State governments is the inviolable duty of that of the Union; the government of every State will feel its own obligation to respect and preserve the rights of the whole.

Adams has served for the past eight years under Monroe, and his aspiration is to continue in his footsteps.

I (now) turn to the Administration of my immediate predecessor. ...In his career of eight years the internal taxes have been repealed; sixty millions of the public debt have been discharged; provision has been made for the comfort and relief of the aged and indigent among the surviving warriors of the Revolution; the regular armed force has been reduced and its constitution revised and perfected; the accountability for the expenditure of public moneys has been made more effective; the Floridas have been peaceably acquired, and our boundary has been extended to the Pacific Ocean; the independence of the southern nations of this hemisphere has been recognized, and recommended by example and by counsel to the potentates of Europe; progress has been made in the defense of the country by fortifications and the increase of the Navy, toward the effectual suppression of the African traffic in slaves; in alluring the aboriginal hunters of our land to the cultivation of the soil and of the mind, in exploring the interior regions of the Union, and in preparing by scientific researches and surveys for the further application of our national resources to the internal improvement of our country.

With foreign threats largely contained, the new President plans to focus on “internal improvements” aimed at the common good – one example being renewed work on “national roads.” This emphasis on strengthening domestic infrastructures is essential to what Henry Clay is already calling his “American System.”

...improvement in our common condition...will embrace the whole sphere of my obligations. The roads and aqueducts of Rome have been the admiration of all after ages....But nearly twenty years have passed since the construction of the first national road was commenced. The authority for its construction was then unquestioned. To how many thousands of our countrymen has it proved a benefit? To what individual has it ever proved an injury?

Here again he hopes that party differences can be resolved around the federal government’s authority to pursue these important upgrades.

I can not but hope that by the...process of friendly, patient, and persevering deliberation...the extent and limitation of the powers of the General Government in relation to this transcendently important interest will be settled and acknowledged to the common satisfaction of all, and every speculative scruple will be solved....

As Adams nears the end of his lengthy address, he acknowledges the “peculiar circumstances” of his election, and asks openly for the trust and support he will need to advance “the welfare of the country.”

Fellow-citizens, you are acquainted with the peculiar circumstances of the recent election, which have resulted in affording me the opportunity of addressing you at this time... You have heard the exposition of the principles which will direct me in the fulfillment of the high and solemn trust imposed upon me in this station.

Less possessed of your confidence in advance than any of my predecessors, I am deeply conscious of the prospect that I shall stand more and oftener in need of your indulgence. Intentions upright and pure, a heart devoted to the welfare of our country, and the unceasing application of all the faculties allotted to me to her service are all the pledges that I can give for the faithful performance of the arduous duties I am to undertake.

I shall look for whatever success may attend my public service; and knowing that "except the Lord keep the city the watchman waketh but in vain," with fervent supplications for His favor, to

His overruling providence I commit with humble but fearless confidence my own fate and the future destinies of my country.

Time: March 4, 1825 – March 4, 1829

Overview Of JQ Adams’s Term

Unlike Monroe, Adams can no longer count on a congress ready to advance his agenda. In fact, partisanship is about to reach a level where new “labels” are materializing to capture the differences.

From Monticello, the founder of the Democratic-Republican Party, Thomas Jefferson, argues that Adams and Clay are actually Federalists in disguise, intent on undermining states’ rights.

The (party) amalgamation is of name only, not of principle. Their aim is now therefore to break down the rights reserved by the constitution to the states as a bulwark against that consolidation, the fear of which produced the whole of the opposition to the constitution at its birth.

Those who support Adams begin to call themselves “National Republicans,” while the “anti’s” drift away to eventually become Jackson “Democrats.”

In 1825, the new President still enjoys a slim margin in both houses of congress – another signal that the will of the people, not the “corrupt bargain,” favored Adams in the recent election.

Congressional Make-Up In 1825

	House	Senate
Pro-Adams	105	26
Anti-Adams	97	20
	202	46

But Adams squanders whatever slight political edge he has in setting up his administration. His high moral tone is uncomfortable around using “patronage” to lever loyalty, and his Cabinet appointments include turn-coats who will actively work on behalf of his opposition. The first is Postmaster General John McLean of Ohio, who backs Jackson throughout his tenure, and is later rewarded by the General with a Supreme Court appointment.

The every slippery Calhoun serves as Vice-President, but soon swings over to Jackson’s side, while still maneuvering for the top job himself.

The Senate confirms Henry Clay as Secretary of State, , but not without embarrassing him with 14 of 41 voting against his appointment.

JQ Adams Cabinet In 1825

Position	Name	Home State
Vice-President	John C. Calhoun	South Carolina
Secretary of State	Henry Clay	Kentucky
Secretary of Treasury	Richard Rush	Pennsylvania
Secretary of War	James Barbour	Virginia
Secretary of the Navy	Samuel Southard	New Jersey
Attorney General	William Wirt	Virginia
Postmaster General	John McLean	Ohio

The decision to name Clay to State also removes from the House the one man whose legislative mastery would give the American System initiatives their best chance for approval.

Instead the victories in this regard are few and far between. Congress does approve an extension of the National Road through Ohio, the Erie Canal becomes fully operational, and America's first genuine railroad company, the Baltimore & Ohio line is chartered in Maryland.

But then come a steady stream of set-backs, ironically involving diplomatic issues, Adam's supposed forte.

- Attempts to engage America in building bridges to Latin America are sidelined in Congress.
- Mexico rejects a sizable cash offer aimed at acquiring Texas.
- A border dispute between Maine and New Brunswick turns into violent confrontations.
- Trade with the British West Indies is shut down after negotiations over terms end in failure.
- Efforts to move the Creek tribes out of Georgia provoke a serious federal vs. state conflict.

With each mis-step, the Jackson Democrats in Congress grow more vocal in their attacks on the President.

In the mid-term election of 1826, the Anti-Adams/Pro-Jackson forces gain control over both the House (113-100) and the Senate (26 to 21). Of particular note here are gains by Jackson in the Northeast, largely the result of backing from Senator Martin Van Buren of New York.

Results Of House Elections In 1826

	Slavery Allowed(12)	Slavery Banned (12)
Old Established East Coast States (15)	Pro Adams – 17 Anti-Adams – 44	Pro Adams – 61 Anti-Adams – 44
Emerging States West Of Appalachian Range (9)	Pro Adams – 8 Anti-Adams – 21	Pro Adams – 14 Anti-Adams – 4

Note: East Coast slave states (Maryland, Delaware, Virginia, NC, SC, Georgia); east coast free (Maine, Mass, NH, Vt, Conn, Penn, RI, NY, NJ); west slave (Ky, Tenn, Ala, Miss, La, MO); west free (Ohio, Ind, IL)

Results Of Senate Elections In 1826

	Slavery Allowed(12)	Slavery Banned (12)
Old Established East Coast States (15)	Pro Adams – 1 Anti-Adams – 11	Pro Adams – 12 Anti-Adams – 5
Emerging States West Of Appalachian Range (9)	Pro Adams – 3 Anti-Adams – 9	Pro Adams – 5 Anti-Adams – 1

While Adams is beset by one political problem after another, he oversees a domestic economy which has recovered nicely from the doldrums of the Monroe era.

Economic Overview During Adams's Presidency

	1824	1825	1826	1827	1828
Total GDP (\$MM)	\$ 750	822	866	916	897
% Change		10%	5%	6%	(2%)
Per Capita GDP	\$69	74	76	78	74

The final years of Adams's term are given over to the lowest forms of political skullduggery on record to date – as the opposing parties attempt to blacken the names of Adams and Jackson before the 1828 election.

One particularly cynical legislative effort by the Jackson forces involves the Tariff of 1828 to shift support away from Adams in western “swing states.” The bill does this by imposing higher duties on foreign imports of raw wool, rum and other staples produced by farmers from Pennsylvania to the frontier – while adding features almost certain to irritate New England and the old South. Sponsors assume that Adams will veto it in the end, thus costing him western support.

Instead he actually signs the bill, which is soon labelled the “Tariff of Abominations.” Ironically, antagonism toward the bill centered in South Carolina will come back to haunt the Jackson men in the years ahead.

Key Events: JQ Adams Term

1825	
Mar 8	John Poinsett approved as first minister to Mexico
Mar 24	Mexican province of Tejas declared open to American settlers
July 25	Approval given to extend the Cumberland road west from wheeling through Ohio
Oct	Tenn leg nominates Jackson for 1828 president
Oct 26	Erie canal is completed
Dec 6	Adams message to congress sparks controversy
Dec 26	Congress approves sending two “observers” to Bolivars panama conference
1826	
Jan 6	Anti-Adams newspaper U.S.. telegraph starts up in dc
Feb 13	American temperance society founded in Boston
April 8	Secretary of State Henry Clay and Senator John Randolph fight a bloodless duel called by Clay
May 2	The US recognizes Peru
July 4	John Adams and Thomas Jefferson both die on 50 th anniversary of Independence
Sept 12	Former Freemason William Morgan disappears, provoking Anti-Mason Party founding
Oct 7	First US rail tracks laid in Quincy, Mass.; 3 miles long and for horse drawn wagons
Nov	Anti-Administration/Jackson politicians win majority in Congress
1827	
Jan 10	Bill to increase tariff (above 1824) on woolens passes in House, loses in Senate on Calhoun vote
Feb 28	The B&O Railroad chartered by state of Maryland
July 2	President of SC College, Thomas Cooper, says that the tariff favors north at expense of south
July 30	Delegates from 13 states meet in Harrisburg to support call for higher tariffs
Aug 6	US and Britain renew 1818 Treaty to “share” Oregon Country for another 10 years
Nov 15	Creek Indians sign treaty ceding all remaining land in Georgia to US
Dec 24	Congress rejects Harrisburg proposal to raise protective tariff
1828	
Jan 12	US and Mexico agree on Sabine River boundary line in southwest
Jan 31	Jackson forces in Congress pass cynical Tariff hike aimed at embarrassing Adams
April 21	Noah Webster publishes his American Dictionary of the American Language
May 13	Tariff hike passes House 105-94 and senate 26-21
May 19	“Tariff of Abominations” signed into law by Adams
Oct 16	Delaware and Hudson canal opens
Dec 3	Jackson is elected president
Dec 19	South Carolina legislature “nullifies” the Tariff of 1828 according to Calhoun assertions
1829	
Mar 4	Jackson inaugurated