

Interpretation

A JOURNAL OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Winter 1990-91

Volume 18 Number 2

- 177 Chaninah Maschler Some Observations About Plato's *Plaedo*
- 211 David Roochnik The Serious Play of Plato's *Euthydemus*
- 233 Charles Salman The Wisdom of Plato's Aristophanes
- 251 Roger M. Barrus David Hume's Theology of Liberation
- 273 Greg Russell Jeffersonian Ethics in Foreign Affairs
- 293 Daryl McGowan Tress Feminist Theory and Its Discontents
- Discussion*
- 313 Christopher A. Colmo Reply to Lowenthal
- Book Review*
- 317 Maureen Feder-Marcus *Time, Freedom, and the Common Good: An Essay in Public Philosophy*, by Charles Sherover

Interpretation

- Editor-in-Chief Hilail Gildin
- General Editors Seth G. Benardete • Charles E. Butterworth • Hilail Gildin • Robert Horwitz (d. 1987) • Howard B. White (d. 1974)
- Consulting Editors Christopher Bruell • Joseph Cropsey • Ernest L. Fortin • John Hallowell • Wilhelm Hennis • Harry V. Jaffa • David Lowenthal • Muhsin Mahdi • Harvey C. Mansfield, Jr. • Arnaldo Momigliano (d. 1987) • Michael Oakeshott • Ellis Sandoz • Leo Strauss (d. 1973) • Kenneth W. Thompson
- Editors Wayne Ambler • Maurice Auerbach • Fred Baumann • Michael Blaustein • Mark Blitz • Patrick Coby • Christopher A. Colmo • Edward J. Erler • Maureen Feder-Marcus • Joseph E. Goldberg • Pamela K. Jensen • Grant B. Mindle • James W. Morris • Will Morrisey • Gerald Proietti • Charles T. Rubin • Leslie G. Rubin • John A. Wettergreen (d. 1989) • Bradford P. Wilson • Hossein Ziai • Michael Zuckert • Catherine Zuckert

Manuscript Editor Lucia B. Prochnow

- Subscriptions Subscription rates per volume (3 issues):
individuals \$21
libraries and all other institutions \$34
students (five-year limit) \$12

Single copies available.

Postage outside U.S.: Canada \$3.50 extra;
elsewhere \$4 extra by surface mail (8 weeks or longer) or \$7.50 by air.

Payments: in U.S. dollars AND payable by
a financial institution located within the U.S.A.
(or the U.S. Postal Service).

CONTRIBUTORS should follow *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 13th ed. or manuals based on it; place references in the text or follow current journal style in printing references. To ensure impartial judgment of their manuscripts, contributors should omit mention of their other work; put, on the title page only, their name, any affiliation desired, address with postal/zip code in full, and telephone. Please send **THREE** clear copies.

Composition by Eastern Graphics, Binghamton, N.Y. 13901
Printed and bound by Wickersham Printing Co., Lancaster, PA 17603

Inquiries: Patricia D'Allura, Assistant to the Editor,
INTERPRETATION, Queens College, Flushing, N.Y.
11367-0904, U.S.A. (718)520-7099

Jeffersonian Ethics in Foreign Affairs:

John Quincy Adams and the Moral Sentiments of a Realist

GREG RUSSELL

Northeast Louisiana University

Commemorating the Jeffersonian heritage in American diplomacy, one inextricably tied to the lawful purposes of civil government, is certainly appropriate at a time when leading officials salute democratic revolutions throughout Europe, South Africa, and Latin America. Recent political and ideological upheavals throughout the Soviet empire and Eastern bloc nations challenge anew the national purpose as much as the national security of the United States. The need to redefine the national interest "beyond containment" carries with it the duty to reconsider the historical basis of American moral and political leadership in a troubled world. Since the earliest days of the republic, the struggle for human rights has inspired partisans to invoke the "verdict of history" and proclaim the "inextinguishable human spirit" as inseparable from the moral fiber of the American union. "From the time of the Declaration of our Independence," according to Henry Kissinger, "Americans have believed that this country has a moral significance for the world" (p. 59). The United States was created in a conscious act by a people dedicated to a set of political and ethical principles they held to be of universal meaning.

A new generation of American statesmen, looking beyond Cold War rivalry, are called upon to affirm certain truths to be virtually self-evident: that the United States is a great power with a unique national identity; that what we do will affect not only our own survival but the fate of Western civilization as well; that men fighting for freedom are moved by great ideals; and that, for these reasons, it is urgent that we see ourselves and that others see us as acting in accord with ideals which are sharable and worthy of respect. Today, Jefferson's common human faith in the rights of man will certainly find acceptance in a wider immediate circle than he ever dreamed of.

Convinced that the republican is the only form of government which is not eternally at open or secret war with the rights of mankind, my prayers and efforts shall be cordially distributed to the support of that we have so happily established. It is an animating thought, that while we are securing the rights of ourselves and our posterity, we are pointing out the way to struggling nations, who wish like us to emerge from their tyrannies also. Heaven help their struggles, and lead them, as it has done us, triumphantly through them. (Quoted in Koch, p. 151).

The two great religious-moral traditions that infused early American thinking—New England Calvinism and Virginian Jeffersonianism—arrive at similar conclusions about the meaning of American national character and destiny. In *Wonder Working Providence of Zion's Saviour* (1650), Edward Johnson spoke of New England as the place “where the Lord would create a new heaven and a new earth, new churches and a new commonwealth altogether.” A century later Ezra Stiles of Yale preached a sermon on “The United States elevated to glory and honor” in which he defined the nation as “God’s American Israel.” Jefferson and John Adams called the amalgam “the dictates of reason and pure Americanism” (To Edward Rutledge, June 24, 1797, Jefferson [1903], IX, 409. For “Americanism” in John Adams see his letter to Benjamin Rush, July 7, 1805, in Schutz and Adair, p. 30.) The self-interpretive symbols of American nationhood look in two directions: “towards the truth of man’s existence personally, socially, and historically, on the one hand; and toward the persuasive and evocative articulation of that truth in the foundation myth of the new community, on the other hand.” The vision at the center of American politics, then, is structured by insights into human reality “taken to be universally valid for all mankind, even as they are adapted to the concrete conditions of time and place at the moment of the articulation of the new nation as an entity politically organized for action in history” (Sandoz, pp. 35, 35–36, 38, 83–84, 105, 114–15, and 123. For the theories of articulation and representation here, see Voegelin, Chs. 1–3.)

Jefferson’s conception of the innocence and virtue of the new nation was not informed by the Biblical symbolism of the New England tracts. His religious faith was a form of Christianity which had passed through the rationalism of the French Enlightenment. His moral transcendence was expressed in the belief of the power of “nature’s God” over the vicissitudes of history. Jefferson was moved to acknowledge that nature’s God had a very special purpose in founding this new community. America had a political mission to fulfill, for itself and before the eyes of the world: to prove that reason, order, and law are the genuine fruits of an educated people governing themselves.

the eyes of the virtuous all over the earth are turned with anxiety on us, as the only depositories of the sacred fire of liberty, and that our falling into anarchy would decide forever the destinies of mankind, and seal the political heresy that man is incapable of self-government. (To John Hollis, Esq., May 5, 1811, Jefferson [1903], XIII, 58)

Every nation has its own form of spiritual pride. These examples of American self-appreciation could be matched by corresponding sentiments in other nations. To know that nations are subject to the moral law is one thing, while to pretend to know with certainty what is good and evil in the relations among nations is quite another (Morgenthau [1973], p. 11). “Power,” John Adams

wrote, “always thinks it has a great soul and vast views beyond the comprehension of the weak: and that it is doing God’s service when it is violating all His laws” (quoted in *ibid.*, pp. 90–91). The tragic conception of politics and diplomacy, however, need not recommend cynicism or complacency with respect to fundamental moral choices. Indeed, it will make a difference whether the particular culture in which the policies of nations—the actions of statesmen—are formed is only as deep and as high as the nation’s highest ideals, or whether there is a dimension in the culture from which the element of vanity in all human achievements is discerned. Jefferson’s memorable assertion in his First Inaugural—“we are all republicans, we are all federalists”—was perhaps less important as a conciliatory overture than as a subtle intimation of the moral resources in American politics and statecraft.

That the national unity of all Americans carried a distinctive message for mankind can be seen by noting the relationship between power and morals in Jefferson’s philosophy. Of particular importance is how the natural and inalienable rights of man are derived from, or connected with, natural law. For example, Jefferson affirmed the rights of man on a preponderantly moral basis of preference and appropriateness to human nature.¹ Self-realization, always in the interpersonal context of other selves, may be the natural moral goal. The implications of Jefferson’s concept of rights for the conduct of men and nations were detailed by one historian in the following terms:

Natural law is the system of governing norms, rules, and duties that bind man—the correlative, in short, of the natural rights which he claims. Natural law in its widest legal sense (what Jefferson referred to as “the law of nature and nations”) includes this meaning plus the usages and customs of nations dealing with other nations in the interest of peace and under the controlling ideal of more humane and civilized practice. (Koch, pp. 44–45)

The enduring moral principles (e.g., the worth of every human being, equality of consideration to which all are entitled in society, justice, and fraternity) are in no way limited to a given time or society but invoke the vision of a brotherhood of man. The important point is that one hereby asserts a moral limit on power politics; one condemns force and violence as an extensive, wholesale instrument of national or international policy. Jefferson urged justice upon nations if they would have the firm friendship of other countries. Of Great Britain, unable to win allies in the great battle with Napoleonic France, Jefferson wrote that she was a living example “that no nation however powerful, any more than any individual, can be unjust with impunity. Sooner or later public opinion, an instrument merely moral in the beginning, will find occasion physically to inflict its sentence upon the unjust.” The lesson, he believed, was “useful to the weak as well as the strong” (To James Madison, April 23, 1804, Jefferson [1892–99], VIII, 300).

The law of nature and nations, then, becomes another illustration of Jefferson's theory of natural rights. Each nation "forms a moral person" and each member of a nation is "personally responsible for his society." The continental tradition of *raison d'état*, the historical debate about ethical "dualism" from Machiavelli to Bismarck, is hardly compatible with a theory of rights so expressed. Briefly summarized, the heritage of "reason of state" holds that the state is subject to no rule of conduct but the one which is dictated by its own self-interest. *Salus publica suprema lex*. When the statesman is confronted with a choice between two actions, the one ethical, the other not, of which the latter has a better chance of bringing about the desired result, he must choose the latter. When he acts in a private capacity, however, he, like any other private individual, must choose the former; "for, while political action is free from ethical limitations, private action is subject to them. The individual as such is moral by nature; political society is amoral, also by nature" (Morgenthau [1946], p. 176).

Jefferson rejected any dual ethical standard and argued that the limits upon the moral conduct of the nation are the same as those upon relations between man and man.

The moral duties which exist between individual and individual in a state of nature, accompany them into a state of society, and the aggregate of the duties of all the individuals composing the society constitutes the duties of that society towards any other; so that between society and society the same moral duties exist as did between individuals composing them, while in an unassociated state, and their maker not having released them from those duties on their forming themselves into a nation. ("Opinion on the Question Whether the United States Has a Right to Intervene to Renounce Their Treaties with France" [1903], III, 227)

Jefferson's counsel merely points to the fact that it is always the individual who acts, either with reference to his ends alone or with reference to the ends of others. "I know but one code of morality for men, whether acting singly or collectively." If the morality of a solitary individual "produces a just line of conduct in him . . . why should not the morality of 100 men produce a just line of conduct in them acting together?" (To James Madison, August 28, 1789 [1903], VII, 448–49). The action of a society or nation has no empirical existence at all. What empirically exists are always the actions of individuals who perform identical or different actions with reference to a common end.

The only exception to the laws of nature and nations is the transcendent right to resist self-destruction. As there are circumstances which sometimes excuse the nonperformance of contracts between man and man, so nations may annul their obligations "if performance becomes self-destructive to the party." Only "the law of self-preservation overrules the laws of obligations in others" ("Opinion . . ." [1903], III, 228). In addition, Jefferson was enough of a realist to see clearly that no nation can fully transcend its own interests. "All know the

influence of interest on the mind of man, and how unconsciously his judgment is warped by that influence" ("Autobiography," [1903], I, 120). In 1812, when Napoleon was at the pinnacle of his power, Jefferson was unprepared to contemplate moral principles apart from the political exigencies of American national security. His was the hope that "the powers of Europe may be so poised and counterpoised among themselves, that their own security may require the presence of all their forces at home, leaving the other quarters of the world in undisturbed tranquility" (quoted in Morgenthau [1951], pp. 20–21).

This was also a realism that made room for political ideals and declarations of rights. The Thomas Jefferson who wrote in 1809 that "I am persuaded no constitution was ever before so well calculated as ours for extensive empire and self-government" could also write in 1817 that America's role in the world was to "consecrate a sanctuary for those whom the misrule of Europe may compel to seek happiness in other climes." America's influence was not to be military but moral in nature: "This refuge once known," he declared, "will produce happiness even of those who remain there, by warning their taskmasters that another Canaan is open where their subjects will be received as brothers" (quoted in Bellah, p. 89. See also Germino.) The moves and countermoves in the struggle for political power must be intelligible as a dialectic movement toward the realization of justice. Consider in this connection Jefferson's admonition that " . . . it is true, that nations are to be judges for themselves; since no nation has the right to sit in judgment over another, but the tribunal of our consciences remains, and that also of the opinion of the world" ("Opinion . . ." [1903], III, 228).

Modern perspectives of realism and idealism in American diplomacy often sharpen the power-morality dichotomy in such a fashion as to ignore the manner in which a statesman's political responsibility is inseparable from his role as a moral witness to the actions of his nation. Implicit in the Jeffersonian world view is the prescription that America's dual importance, as a native achievement and worldwide example, must embody an element of restraint and pay proper respect to the varieties of possible political experience elsewhere. For the diplomatist, the Jeffersonian legacy is not a doctrine or mere ideological credo; rather, his contribution (although not alone here among the Founding Fathers) underscores the centrality of political ethics for relating the national interest to structures of community and justice beyond the parochial nation state. The issue is one that points to the need for a meeting ground upon which the philosopher and statesman can momentarily converge.

JOHN QUINCY ADAMS AND AN ETHICS OF CIRCUMSPECTION

Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., refers to John Quincy Adams, and several of his contemporaries, as honest Jeffersonians (p. 313). Admittedly, the categorization is arguable in light of several profound differences in political and philo-

sophical orientation; however, Schlesinger's paradox is not entirely lost with reference to a common intellectual inclination on the part of both leaders to affirm, however precariously, the moral basis of American power and expansion. Moreover, they arrived at this conclusion by divergent paths, even while disagreeing on the origins and merits of republican and democratic politics. "We are . . . as Mr. Jefferson forty years ago said, all federalists—all republicans, but not all *Democrats*, no more that we are all Aristocrats or Monarchists" (Adams [1842], p. 30). Yet Adams, the only federalist in the United States Senate to support Jefferson's purchase of the Louisiana territory, acknowledged in this transaction

Fortune claims to herself the lion's share. To seize and to turn to profit the precise instant of the turning tide, is itself among the eminent properties of a Statesman, and if requiring less elevated virtue than the firmness and prudence that withstand adversity, or the moderation which adorns and dignifies prosperity, it is not less essential to the character of an accomplished ruler of men. (Adams [1850], pp. 83–84)

Adams, with Jefferson, knew too well that "the selfish and the social passions are intermingled in the conduct of every man acting in a public capacity" (*Memoirs*, August 20, 1809, II, 13). Moreover, the good which an individual can do for his fellow citizens "is seldom proportioned to his dispositions and the inclination to do good itself, unless enlightened by a clear perception, guided by a discriminating judgment, and animated by . . . active resolution, evaporates in the dreams of imagination . . ." (*Memoirs*, March 4, 1820, V, 13).

The intellectual universe of John Quincy Adams, a compound of Christian faith in the gospel of modern liberal reason, discloses the unique resources that would help mold the diplomatic achievements of America's greatest Secretary of State in the nineteenth century. What has been described as the Golden Age of American diplomacy, the 1814–1828 era, forms the backdrop for Adams's diplomacy during the Madison and Monroe administrations. During these years, the United States signed the treaty of peace ending the War of 1812, issued the Monroe Doctrine, and strengthened its maritime power through an agreement with Britain to clear the Great Lakes of warships and by obtaining rights to fish off the coast of Labrador and Newfoundland. Americans extended their continental reach through the annexation of Florida, by removing Russian influence from the southwestern coast of North America, through the establishment of the American-Canadian boundary from the Great Lakes to the Rockies, and by staking their first claims to the Pacific coast (La Feber, p. 13).

Adams was a central figure in all these transactions and, in each instance, saw a larger moral message for the exercise of power in defense of the national interest. Inasmuch as the voluminous record of Adams the diplomatist has been treated at length elsewhere (see Bemis, Graebner, and Lang and Russell), this

essay looks more towards Adams the ethicist and his unflinching regard for the morality of state behavior. His inability to countenance an “irremediable gap” between the principles of ethics and diplomacy provides a useful point of departure to rethink the moral prerogatives of the American statesman. Adams’s quality as a human being has a direct and obvious relation to his political and social thinking. He viewed the moral and intellectual qualities of others from unassailable heights whereon he felt himself for the most part secure, despite occasional lapses of penetrating self-analysis. He was, however, no ascetic moralist; he also felt the promptings of desire for success and place:

I want the seals of power and place,
The ensigns of command,
Charged by the people’s unbought grace
To rule my native land.
Nor crown, nor sceptre would I ask
But from my country’s will,
By day, by night, to ply the task
Her cup of bliss to fill. (Adams [1848], p. 22)

Adams first entered the political arena with the publication of his “Letters of Publicola,” demolishing Thomas Paine’s *Rights of Man*. These papers, which grew out of the controversy between Paine and Edmund Burke concerning the French Revolution, exemplify Adams’s reliance on natural law to illumine the foundations of liberty and to defend minority rights in republican government. Like the writings of his father, his seek to oppose the extreme views of Paine and of the French Revolution and yet to retain faith in the American theory of natural rights. Adams many times expresses his allegiance to the principle of natural rights, including the “unalienable right of resistance to tyranny.” It is not the basic premise of Paine’s book to which he is opposed, but the conclusions which Paine infers from them. This “commentary upon the rights of man,” he says, draws “questionable deductions from unquestionable principles.” Paine, as the controversy develops, acknowledged “that which a whole nation chooses to do, it has a right to do.” Adams responded with the belief that “it is of infinite consequence that the distinction between *power* and *right* should be fully acknowledged, and should be admitted as one the fundamental principles of legislators.”

This principle, that a whole nation has a right to do whatever it pleases, cannot in any sense be admitted as true. The eternal and immutable laws of justice and of morality are paramount to all human legislation. The violation of those laws is certainly within the power, but it is not among the rights of nations. The power of a nation is the collected power of all the individuals which compose it. If, therefore, a majority are bound by no law human or divine, and have no other rule but their sovereign will and pleasure to direct them, what possible security can

any citizen have for the protection of unalienable rights? The principles of liberty must still be the sport of arbitrary power, and the hideous form of despotism must lay aside the diadem and the scepter, only to assume the party-colored garments of democracy. (II "Publicola," 11 June 1791, *Writings*, I, 69–71. See also Wright, pp. 168–71.)

The half-century of public life—as diplomatic emissary, Secretary of State, President, and Congressman—led him to defend the rights of property and tradition while opposing slavery and the southern interest. Between the two commitments, Adams saw no essential contradiction. "The True Theory of Government," he wrote to George Bancroft in 1835, "is that which provides alike for the protection and security both of persons and property" ("Letters," pp. 246–47). He died painfully conscious of his failure to accomplish any of those high hopes for American national character upon which he had expended his life. Judging Adams' credentials as a conservative thinker, one author writes: "It is hard to reproach this inspiring man with the collapse of his ideals; but the fact remains that he expected more from men than any true conservative should expect, and he got from them less than many a leader immeasurably Adams' moral inferior can obtain" (Kirk, pp. 257–58). Adams was forever tormented by the thought of what he *should* have been, destroyed by a nation and a superintending Providence unable or unwilling to heed his vision of national grandeur.

If my intellectual powers had been such as have been sometimes committed by the Creator of men to single individuals of the species, my diary would have been, next to the Holy Scriptures, the most . . . valuable book ever written by human hands, and I should have been one of the greatest benefactors of my country and of mankind. I would, by the irresistible power of . . . Almighty God, have banished war and slavery from the face of the earth forever. But the conceptive power of mind was not conferred upon me by my Maker, and I have not improved the scanty portion of His gifts as I might and ought to have done. (Quoted in H. Adams, pp. 34–35)

He sensed that his duty was the conservation of America's moral worth; he knew his age for a time of transition; but how to contend with this grim sphinx, he never properly discovered.

That Adams as thinker has been largely ignored by most standard works on America's intellectual traditions may be explained, to some degree, by the manner in which his world view cut across conventional theoretical guideposts. Henry Adams considered that his grandfather had been a political man, actuated by ordinary feelings; whereas Brooks Adams judged him an "idealistic philosopher who sought with absolute disinterestedness to put the Union upon a plane of civilization which would have averted the recent War; who failed, as all men must fail who harbor such a purpose, and who . . . resigned himself

and his ambitions to fate” (quoted in H. Adams, p. vii. See also Nevins, p. ix.). Adams’s social and political philosophy derived in great measure from his own reading and converse with eighteenth-century thinkers, in particular John Locke, but it constituted as well a special synthesis of old ideas. He was also obligated to the “long tradition of medieval political thought, back to St. Thomas, in which the reality of moral restraints on power, the responsibility of rulers to the communities which they ruled, and the subordination of government to law were axiomatic.” His combination of the Lockean position with an important emphasis upon the vigorous role to be played by government in a program of internal improvements; his combination of a strong nationalism based upon a sense of moral rectitude with an insistence upon self-restraint, equality, and a recognition of moral laws in the relations of nations; his combination of a religious faith in the natural-law concept with an empirical and skeptical view in the realm of science made Adams unique among public figures of his day in the United States (Lipsky, p. 328; Sabiñe, p. 523).

Adams has been aptly described as “the classic example of the political moralist in thought and word, who cannot help being a political realist in action.” His international thought was anchored in the realist tradition of Washington and Hamilton; yet he did the better part of his work in statecraft in an atmosphere saturated with Jeffersonian principles. Between Adams’s moral principles and his conception of the national interest of the United States there was hardly ever a conflict. The moral principles, as Hans J. Morgenthau suggested, were nothing but political interests formulated in moral terms, and vice versa ([1951]), pp. 19, 22). Adams’ seminal contributions to the American diplomatic tradition—freedom of the seas, the Monroe Doctrine, and Manifest Destiny—are evidence of this achievement. For example, the legal principle of freedom of the seas was a weapon through which an inferior naval power tried to safeguard its independence from Great Britain. Similarly, the Monroe Doctrine’s moral postulates of nonintervention (and anti-imperialism) were negative conditions for the security and prestige of the United States. Their fulfillment insulated the United States from the power struggles in Europe and, through it, ensured the predominance of the United States in the Western Hemisphere. Manifest Destiny was the moral and ideological incentive for American continental expansion and subjugation of native inhabitants (*ibid.*, pp. 22–23).

Morgenthau’s analysis, however, speaks more to effect and less to cause. The clear implication of his commentary is that realism and idealism need not always be treated as mutually exclusive categories or criteria from which to judge the words and deeds of the statesman. Equally important in this connection is whether moral desiderata above the nation state function only as an ideological apology for the powerful (the homage that vice pays to virtue) or as an exercise in costly self-deception for the weak. Is the statesman ill-advised to derive norms of national conduct from some other source than mundane political reality? It must be noted that these questions are rarely, if at all, felt and

confronted by the statesman in a way that can be easily transformed into the systematic analysis of hypothetical possibilities. While Adams may have avoided systematic expression, he evolved a conception of life, God, and the universe into which his attitude on all the problems of his political time may be fitted. Even if Adams could not disengage himself entirely from the singular heat of political passions, his legacy substantiates the normative and philosophical core of all serious political thinking. Of no small significance here is how his reflection on man's nature and the moral tasks of governance relates to the duties of American national interest in world affairs.

He found the world about him confined and controlled by a paramount law of nature, superior to the regulations of humans, a law which the logical mind could discern and apply to the political fortunes of nations. For example, he rejected the demand pressed on the Washington Administration that the United States support France against the combined powers of Europe in 1793. America was commanded by the "law of nature, which is paramount to all human legislation, or compact, to remain at peace, and to content ourselves with wishing that laureled victory may sit upon the sword of justice, and that smooth success may always be strewed before the feet of virtuous Freedom" (III "Marcellus," August 24, 1793, *Writings*, I, 145–46). In this philosophical scheme the United States occupied a unique position, for it was the first nation in history to announce foundation principles embedded in the "law of nature" (see Adams, [1831]). The Declaration of Independence announced "the *one* People, assuming their station among the Powers of the Earth, as a religious, civilized and Christian People—acknowledging themselves bound by the obligations, and claiming the rights to which they were entitled by the Laws of Nature and Nature's God." The laws of nature, according to Adams, applied to the social intercourse between sovereign communities and found expression in the European law of nations. These laws are "all derived from three sources:—the . . . dictates of justice; usages, sanctioned by custom; and treaties, or national covenants." In addition, Adams acknowledged that the "*Christian* nations, between themselves, admit, with various latitudes of interpretation, and little consistency of practice, the laws of humanity and mutual benevolence taught in the gospel of Christ" (II "Marcellus," *Writings*, I, 129). Americans "laid the foundation of their government upon the eternal and unalterable principles of human rights." That government's essential purpose—the very reason for which it is instituted—is to secure the "natural rights of mankind" ensured that the structures of power would be "subordinate to the *moral* supremacy of the People" ([1837], pp. 20–22).

Nor is Adams's devotion to the precepts of natural law invalidated by pointing out that, on occasion, he could specifically sanction departure from principle, although the departure was explained in terms of moral and legal obligation. Concerning the acquisition of Louisiana, Adams believed that, although the consent of the inhabitants should have been gained, it would have been

impracticable to try to obtain it prior to the treaty and that “theoretic principles of government” had to be modified to meet the “situations of human events and human concerns” (“Notes on Speech on Motion,” *Writings*, III, 28–29). The treaty-making power had been used constitutionally in acquiring the territory; a plebiscite might have denied the results of the treaty. Yet the United States could not be relieved of the obligation to procure the consent of the inhabitants after the treaty.

And as nothing but necessity can justify even a momentary departure from those principles which we hold as the most sacred laws of nature and of nations, so nothing can justify extending the departure beyond the bounds of necessity. From the instant when that [necessity] ceases the principle returns in all its force, and every further violation of it is error and crime. (ibid.)

The law of nature, then, determines the extent of deviation that necessity may occasion from its precepts. Adams once wrote in his *Memoirs* that principles should be adhered to strongly only to the degree of their importance and of the importance of results deriving from their application (December 22, 1833, IX, 58). Neither intentions nor results are, by themselves, a moral guarantor of the national interest. Adams would not accept our dichotomy of realism and idealism; he would, as Nathan Tarcov explains, emphasize the complementary relation of principle and prudence. “Principles are not self-applying: They do not tell you what to do. They require prudence and judgment for their application. Prudence is not self-sufficient either; it requires principles for guidance” (Tarcov, p. 48).

The competing claims of power and principle to which Adams alluded were nowhere better exemplified than in his own defense of General Jackson’s 1818 invasion of Spanish territory in Florida and the storming of Pensacola. On the one hand, Adams stood alone in the Cabinet in holding that the action had been “defensive,” neither an act of war nor in violation of the Constitution (*Mem-oirs*, July 17, 1818, IV, 111), that the capture of Pensacola was in anticipation of a threat from the Spanish governor to drive Jackson out of the province that he had entered in pursuance of his orders. He cited chapter and verse from Martens on international law in support of his convictions. On the other hand, he wrote of the Administration’s moral and political “dilemma” and was himself unable to escape the judgment of power at hand.

The Administration were placed in a dilemma from which it is impossible for them to escape censure by some, and factious crimination by many. If they avow and approve Jackson’s conduct, they incur the double responsibility of having commenced a war with Spain, and of warring in violation of the Constitution without the authority of Congress. If they disavow him, they must give offence to all his friends, encounter the shock of popularity, and have the appearance of truckling to Spain. . . . But the mischief of this determination lies deeper: 1. It is

weakness, and confession of weakness. 2. The disclaimer of power in the Executive is of dangerous example and of evil consequences. 3. There is injustice to the officer in disavowing him when he is strictly justifiable. (Nevins, pp. 196–200)

Adams's position, elaborated further in a momentous state paper to the American Minister in Spain, won the enthusiastic endorsement of Jefferson. This was "among the ablest compositions [he had] ever seen, both as to logic and style . . ." and was a vivid illustration of the level of American statecraft (from Jefferson to President Monroe, January 18, 1819, in Adams, *Writings*, VI, 502). Intervening circumstances, particularly slavery and the annexation of Texas (the "apoplexy of the Constitution"), led Adams some three decades later to reverse his position and disclaim the power of President Polk's "aggression" against Mexico in 1846. Adams viewed the war as an attempt by Polk to move beyond proper continental limits through the use of force and expansion of slavery.

With respect to the first principles of philosophy and theology, as apart from science, Adams was less given to questioning the reasons for things than his father, with whom he discussed the issue. John Quincy Adams spoke of never having "much relish for the speculations of the first philosophy"; his mind was not one that took delight "in reasoning high upon 'Fix'd fate, free will, and foreknowledge absolute' " (To John Adams, October 29, 1816, *Writings*, VI, 111–12). Disavowing the metaphysics of doctrinal schisms within his own faith, Adams declared that "the only importance of religion to my mind counts in its influence . . . upon the conduct of mankind" (VII, 90). Adams believed in "the genuine doctrines of Christianity in their application to the pursuit of happiness." In addition, he cited the "Socratic and Ciceronian moral philosophy as the most exalted system of human conduct ever presented to the world" (*Memoirs*, April 17, 1813, II, 462). This synthesis of classical and Christian dimensions is broadly compatible with the moral-legal precepts shaping the Founders' faith in a constitution grounded in principles of "higher law."

Its tenets were beyond the ordinary level of human infirmity; and so are those of Christianity. It made the essence of virtue to consist in self-subjugation; and so does Christianity. It gave out a theory of perfection to the aim of man, and made the endeavor to attain it duty; so does Christianity. The perfect example . . . was not given, as by Christ; not even Socrates. Yet he, and Cicero . . . did attain an eminence of practical virtue. . . (ibid.)

It was among the obligations of statesman, Adams believed, to "aim in so far as their abilities extend towards the moral purification of their country from besetting sins." This would be accomplished, in the first instance, "by setting the example of private morality"; and, second, "by promoting the cause in every way that they can lawfully act on others" (To James Lloyd, October 1,

1822, *Writings*, VII, 312–13). For Adams, natural religion was not a product of a spontaneous understanding in the heart, but was a learned body of principles in the keeping of society and brought to each generation by the forces of civic education.

In Adams's political theory, the Creator had made man a "social being," had blended his happiness with that of his fellow man, and government was a necessary instrumentality for the effectuation of this liaison. Yet he differed from the general spirit of his day, which was manifested in either a conservative desire for a government only strong enough to keep the enemies of social order in harness, or a more radical—and Jacksonian—opposition to strong government, except insofar as it must be used to keep the economic oligarchy from tyranny. Seeing in any political order the hopes and aspirations of human nature, Adams looked upon reason as the foundation from which "we participate of the divine nature itself." In his inaugural lecture as Harvard Professor of Rhetoric in 1805, Adams observed: "It is by the gift of reason, that the human species enjoys the exclusive privilege of progressive improvement, and is able to avail itself to the advantages of individual discovery" ([1962], pp. 13–14). Civil society merely reflected the prevailing concepts of character and virtue among its members. Government did represent "a restraint upon human action, and as such, a restraint upon Liberty." The constitutional framers were "aware that to induce the People to impose upon themselves such binding ligaments, motives were not less cogent than those from which the basis of human association were . . . necessary" ([1850], pp. 34–35). A theory of rights, therefore, is inconceivable without a corresponding conception of obligations. A passage from Adams's first State of the Union address is worth quoting at length.

The great object of the institution of civil government is the improvement of the condition of those who are parties to the social compact, and no government can accomplish the lawful ends of its institution but in proportion as it improves the condition of those over whom it is established. But moral, political, and intellectual improvement are duties assigned by the Author of Our Existence to social no less than individual man. For the fulfillment of these duties governments are invested with power, and for the attainment of the end . . . the exercise of delegated power is a duty as sacred . . . as the usurpation of powers not granted is criminal and odious. ([1966], I, 243–44)

By no means, however, was Adams's tribute a ceremony of national self-congratulation. He believed that the doctrine of internal improvement had more than an American application. He was, for example, filled with admiration for Peter the Great as the genius who had built St. Petersburg according to a magnificent plan. Peter applied his energies through government, and the capital was suited to the leadership that was reorienting Russia in a new direction. As Secretary of State, Adams admonished the Columbians to think little of Colum-

bia as a center of empire but to give due regard to the bounties of nature. “God to thee has done his part—do thine” (National Archives, IX, 297–98). No negative suspicion of government limited his conception of what men could accomplish through its agency. He enjoined men of all lands to apply their skills through government to the task of internal improvement.

Like Jefferson, Adams was unwilling to admit of any dual morality in the uses of politics and diplomacy—i.e., by setting the political sphere apart from the private one for purposes of ethical evaluation. In his Harvard commencement address upon graduating in 1787, Adams took up the problem in a speech on the “Importance of Public Faith to the Well-Being of a Community.” He was troubled by the suggestion “that nations are not subjected to those laws, which regulate the conduct of individuals; that national policy commands them to consult their interest, though at the expense of foreigners, or of individual citizens.” Could there, he asked, be more than one kind of justice and equity? Could “honor and probity be qualities of such an accommodating nature that they will like the venal sycophant at court suit themselves to all times to the interests of the prevailing party?” (To Jeremy Belknap, August 6, 1787, *Writings*, I, 34–35). Adams thought of the nation as a “moral person” in the family of nations. This moral person, in view of the international law governing the subject, was possessed of external rights and obligations that remained unchanged by any “internal revolution of government.” In this context, he described as a new maxim in the law of nations the principle, especially devised by the victors to apply to Napoleon, that a sovereign by the breach of a treaty should forfeit “all legal right to existence.”

Adams was, of course, exposed to the *political* temptation of acting on a felicitous coincidence between the best interests of the United States and eternal verity.

Nothing that we could . . . do would remove this impression until the world shall be familiarized with the idea of considering our proper domain to be the continent of North America. From the time we became an independent people it was as much a law of nature this should become our pretension as that the Mississippi should flow to the sea. (*Memoirs*, IV, 437–39)

Moreover, he conceived of the law of nature and nature’s God as requiring the eventual achievement of most “liberal” principles of commercial relations and exchange, in particular resulting in the opening up of South American ports to the commerce of the world and in relaxing imperial commercial restrictions. He especially importuned the British to liberalize their system, and propounded a policy of mutual exclusions upon British commerce in order to force concessions. He described the policy of the United States with regard to South America as based upon the two principles of “entire and unqualified reciprocity” and permanent most-favored-nation treatment, which were necessary to the achieve-

ment of South American independence (National Archives, VIII, 241. See also Adams [1900], II, 288). In negotiating treaties of commerce, a nation should seek not only to satisfy its own interests but should also be willing “to concede liberally to that which is adapted to the interest of the other” (“Third Annual Message,” p. 380).

Regarding British and Spanish possessions upon the northern and southern borders, Adams thought it “impossible that centuries should elapse without finding them annexed to the United States.” Few of Adams’s contemporaries would be so quick to stake out the moral high ground by vigorously protesting that this did not involve “any spirit of encroachment or ambition on our part.” Any effort on the part of the United States “to reason the world out of a belief that we are ambitious will have no other effect than to convince them that we add to our ambition hypocrisy” (*Memoirs*, IV, 439).

Adams recognized that the nature of international politics often entailed making a distinction between methods and purposes in diplomacy. The nation may be a moral person; however, self-preservation was also the first law of nature. Nations acknowledged no judge between them on earth. Their governments “from necessity, must in their intercourse with each other decide when the failure of one party to a contract to perform its obligations, absolves the other from the reciprocal fulfillment of its own” ([1839], p. 68). America had “committed many great errors” in “confounding the principles of internal government with those of external relations.” Adams never extended normative sanction to the presence of self-interest in political life. But there “must be force for the government of mankind, and whoever in this world does not choose to fight for his freedom, must turn Quaker or look out for a master” (To William Vans Murray, July 22, 1798, *Writings*, II, 344). Adams disclaimed “as unsound all patriotism incompatible with the principles of eternal justice.” *Fiat justitia, paret coelum*. Yet this line of reasoning was not precisely applicable to the diplomatic craft, inasmuch as negotiation and political compromise were rooted in a prudent disposition to reconcile conflicting values in changing situations.

Adams was acutely conscious of the significance and implication of diplomatic maneuver, and his first contacts with the British government provided him with early experience in the art. Sir Charles Bagot was the most successful British minister he had known. This fact impressed him because success was perhaps based on the minister’s mediocre talents, and this possibility staggered Adams’s “belief in the universality of the maxim that men of the greatest talents ought to be sought out for diplomatic missions.” In a revealing profile, Adams noted

The principal feature of his character is discretion, one of the most indispensable qualities of the good negotiator. His temper is serious, but cheerful. He has no depth of dissimulation, though enough to suppress his feelings when it is for his

interest to conceal them. To neutralize fretful passions and soothe prejudices, a man of good breeding, inoffensive manners, and courteous deportment is nearer to the true diplomatic standard than one with the genius of Shakespeare, the learning of Bentley, the philosophical penetration of Berkeley, or the wit of Swift. (*Memoirs*, April 14, 1819, IV, 339)

Adams understood the delicacy and danger in bestowing diplomatic confidences; “but, crafty and fraudulent as the trade has the reputation of being, I give it as the result of my experience that confidence judiciously . . . bestowed is one of the most powerful and efficacious instruments of negotiation” (May 28, 1819, p. 377). Adams also knew that improper methods, or morally questionable means, may exact a high price. What is here done with good intentions but unwisely and hence with disastrous results is morally defective; for it violates the ethics of responsibility to which action affecting others, and political action *par excellence*, is subject (Morgenthau [1946], p. 186).

ADAMS AND THE AMERICAN MISSION: FINAL THOUGHTS

Adams joined with Jefferson in affirming natural rights as the moral compass of the union; he quoted Madison’s “pride and boast of America, that the rights for which she contended, were the rights of human nature” ([1850], p. 22). His world view was one that could rarely decouple the expression of national interest from underlying values of national purpose. From the horizon of ethics, Adams was reluctant to condone any *essential* difference between public and private moral acts. Perhaps the most that can be said concerning the moral character of a private, as over against a political, action is that an individual acting in one capacity may be more or less moral than when acting in the other.

Adams’s political and diplomatic career was conspicuous by his belief in a vital connection between America’s commitment to mankind and clear limits to the moral authority of the nation’s power in world affairs. As a realist, he understood the restraints imposed by an anarchic world arena in which America would only be a minor (but not always unimportant) player in the European balance. As an idealist, he exhorted his countrymen to uphold the public virtues of republican rule as a model for other nations to emulate. In other words, America’s success in the world—for which a prudent and modestly conceived national interest was necessary—was a function of the nation’s own moral and spiritual stamina in its self-governance. America, Adams wrote in 1816, was “the strongest nation upon the globe for every purpose of justice.” Yet he could not “ask of heaven success, even for my country, in a case where she would be in the wrong.” He hoped America might “be armed in thunder for the defense of right, and self-shackled in eternal impotence for the support of wrong” (To John Adams, August 1, 1816, *Writings*, VI, 60–62).

Adams would even more forcefully accentuate the importance of national self-restraint in his July 4, 1821, oration before the citizens of Washington. His

address was in answer to the question, What has America done for the benefit of mankind? In the assembly of nations, the United States has “held forth to them the hand of honest friendship, of equal freedom, of generous reciprocity.” Furthermore, for over a half-century, the nation “abstained from interference in the concerns of others, even when conflict has been for principles to which she clings. . . .”

Whenever the standard of freedom and independence has or shall be unfurled, there will her heart, her benedictions, and her prayers be. But she goes not abroad, in search of monsters to destroy. She is the well-wisher to the freedom and independence of all. She is the champion and vindicator only of her own. (Quoted in LaFeber, pp. 42–46)

Adams’s remarks point to a concern for the consequences of intervention in wars “of interest and intrigue, of individual avarice, envy, and ambition, which assume the colors and usurp the standard of freedom.” America’s glory “is not *dominion*, but *liberty*. Her march is the march of the mind.” Adams’s concept of international ethics illustrates how universal principles of right and obligation in foreign policy take a direct bearing from the moral and political order of civil society.

NOTES

1. Jefferson’s convictions were concisely stated in the following terms:

We believed, with them, that man was a rational animal, endowed by nature with rights, and with an innate sense of justice; and that he could be restrained from wrong and protected in right, by moderate powers, confided to persons of his own choice, and held to their duties by dependence on his own will.

To Judge William Johnson, June 12, 1823, *Writings*, (1903), XV, 441.

2. National Archives, IX, 8. To Don Dionisio Vives, State Department, May 8, 1820, *Writings*, VII, 18: He asserted that Spain could not be relieved of an obligation to ratify a treaty that had been signed by a plenipotentiary, even though he had acted on unqualified instructions of a sovereign whose authority was subsequently limited by a legislative body asserting a new constitutional power to pass on treaties.

3. To Abigail Adams, April 22, 1815, *Writings*, V, 302. Adams, without ever explicitly dealing with the point at length, distinguished between the sovereign “moral person,” the nation, susceptible of no act incompatible with the necessities of the moral system of which it was a part, and the physical sovereign in a monarchy, who could be sovereign only in a fashion subordinate to the level of a nation. *Annals of Congress*, 9th Congress, 1st session, March 3, 1806, pp. 145–61.

REFERENCES

- Adams, Charles Francis, ed. *Memoirs of John Quincy Adams*. Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1874–77.
- Adams, Henry. *The Degradation of Democratic Dogma*. New York: Macmillan, 1920.
- Adams, John Quincy. “First Annual Message.” In Fred L. Israel, ed., *The State of the Union Messages of the Presidents, 1790–1966*. New York: Chelsea House, 1966.

- _____. "First Annual Message." In James D. Richardson, ed., *A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents, 1789–1897*. Congress, 1900.
- _____. *The Jubilee of the Constitution, a Discourse Delivered at the Request of the New York Historical Society, in the City of New York on Tuesday, the 30th of April 1839; being the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Inauguration of George Washington as President of the United States, on Thursday, the 30th of April, 1789*. New York: Samuel Colman, 1839.
- _____. *Lectures on Rhetoric and Oratory*. New York: Russell and Russell, 1962.
- _____. *The Lives of James Madison and James Monroe*. Boston: Phillips, Sampson and Co., 1850.
- _____. *An Oration Addressed to the Citizens of the Town of Quincy on the Fourth of July, 1831*. Boston: Richardson, Lord and Holbrook, 1831.
- _____. *An Oration Delivered before the Inhabitants of the Town of Newburyport at their request, on the Sixty-first Anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1837*. Newburyport: Charles Whipple, 1837.
- _____. *The Social Compact, Exemplified in the Constitution of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts; with Remarks on the Theories of Divine Right by Hobbes and Filmer, and the Counter Theories of Sidney, Locke, Montesquieu and Rousseau concerning the Origin And Nature of Government*. Providence: Knowles and Vose, 1842.
- _____. "Third Annual Message." In James D. Richardson, ed., *A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents, 1789–1897*. Congress, 1900.
- _____. "The Wants of Man," stanza xxii. In *Poems of Religion and Society*. Auburn and Buffalo: Miller, Orton and Mulligan, 1848.
- _____. *The Writings of John Quincy Adams*. Edited by Worthington C. Ford. New York: Macmillan, 1913–17.
- Annals of Congress*, 9th Congress, 1st Session, March 3, 1806.
- Bellah, Robert N. *The Broken Covenant*. New York: Seabury Press, 1975.
- Bemis, Samuel Flagg, *John Quincy Adams and the Foundations of American Foreign Policy*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1949.
- Germino, Dante. Unpublished paper delivered at the Claremont Institute Conference on the American Bicentennial, Claremont, CA, February 23–25, 1984.
- Graebner, Norman A., ed. *Tradition and Values: American Diplomacy, 1790–1865*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1985.
- Jefferson, Thomas. *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*. Edited by Albert E. Bergh and Andrew Lipscomb. Washington, DC: Jefferson Memorial Association, 1903.
- _____. *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*. Edited by Paul Leicester Ford. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1892–99.
- Kirk, Russell. *The Conservative Mind*. Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1953.
- Kissinger, Henry A. "Morality and Power." In Ernest W. Lefever, ed., *Morality and Foreign Policy*. Washington, DC: Ethics and Public Policy Center of Georgetown University, 1977.
- Koch, Adrienne. *Power, Morals, and the Founding Fathers*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1961.
- LaFeber, Walter, ed. *John Quincy Adams and American Continental Empire*. Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1965.
- Lang, Daniel G., and Greg Russell. "The Ethics of Power in American Diplomacy: The Statecraft of John Quincy Adams." *Review of Politics* (Winter, 1990): 3–31.

- “Letters of John Adams and John Quincy Adams.” *Bulletin of the New York Public Library* X (April 1910): 246–47.
- Lipsky, George P. *John Quincy Adams, His Theory and Ideas*. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1950.
- Morgenthau, Hans J. *In Defense of the National Interest*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1951.
- . *Politics Among Nations*. 5th ed. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973.
- . *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946.
- National Archives, Records of the Department of State, *Diplomatic Instructions, All Countries*.
- Nevins, Allan, ed. *The Diary of John Quincy Adams, 1794–1845*. New York: Longmans, Green, 1928.
- Sabine, George H. *A History of Political Theory*. New York: Henry Holt, 1937.
- Sandoz, Ellis. *A Government of Laws: Political Theory, Religion, and the American Founding*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990.
- Schlesinger, Arthur M., Jr. *The Age of Jackson*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1945.
- Schutz, John A., and Douglass Adair, eds. *Spur of Fame: Dialogues of John Adams and Benjamin Rush, 1805–1813*. San Marino, CA: Huntington Library, 1980.
- Tarcov, Nathan. “Principle and Prudence in Foreign Policy: The Founders’ Perspective.” *The Public Interest* LXXVI (Summer, 1984): 48.
- Voegelin, Eric. *New Science of Politics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952.
- Wright, Benjamin F., Jr. *American Interpretations of Natural Law*. New York: Russell and Russell, 1931.