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HENRY ADAMS ON THE AMERICAN PRESIDENCY

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Presented for the
Doctor of Philosophy
Degree

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For Marshall

ABSTRACT

This study is a consideration of Henry Adams' treatment of American Presidents--both those he knew as contemporaries and those he knew only as historical figures--in such works as his journalistic essays, The Life of Albert Gallatin, the History of the United States During the Administrations of Jefferson and Madison, the novel Democracy, his posthumously published letters, and The Education of Henry Adams. The emphasis has been placed on Adams' depiction of character, that is, the characters of men who were Presidents or who strove unsuccessfully for the office. Since these characterizations can be found throughout nearly the entire expanse of Adams' body of work, they provide clues to the connections and continuities that underlie the development of both Adams' artistic method and certain of his themes.

In his early writings, Adams indicated that he had definite expectations of men who held public office, though those expectations were usually disappointed. The ideal statesman should have ability, integrity, knowledge, unselfishness, social fitness, experience and energy. In determining his criterion for this ideal, Adams turned to both the statesmen he knew as family or friends and to those of the past. His application of this criterion to a number of American Presidents was never done systematically or exhaustively, but rather incidentally as part of the author's

depiction of events significant to his themes.

The chief method used in this study has been the comparison of Adams' early observations (in personal letters and journalist essays) on the men who became President and on the office itself with later comments--often on the same men or situations--as they appear in more polished form in Democracy, the History and The Education. This comparison reveals the growth of the mature writer's ironic and evocative style and the development of his use of certain important political figures as symbols.

In The Education of Henry Adams, both Adams' mature artistic method and his thematic use of political characters came to final fruition. There he concluded, on the basis of his own study of politics, that only men of exceptional character should become President because only such special men might be able to direct various forces at work in society toward some desirable goal. Presidents usually were not successful for a number of reasons. For one thing, such men were rarely produced in our democratic society, and for another members of a democratic electorate would not knowingly keep their true superiors in office for long. Not only would it be difficult for such men to gain power, but the very process of gaining and trying to keep power would lead to their corruption because of the human greed at play in the political party machines. Even if a superior man did gain

political power without having to pay the price of his moral integrity, he would not hold that power long. Either the imbalance of powers between the Senate and the Executive or the forces of circumstances beyond his control would lead inevitably to his failure.

These suppositions about the effect of power on the individual and the ineffectiveness of the individual will in the face of chaotic forces led Adams to suggest that western society was headed toward a general disintegration from which it could only be saved by the development of some evolutionary leap in human thought. If such a change in traditional modes of thinking were possible, he further concluded, it would come through some other form of education than that provided him and the men of his generation by American politics.

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INTRODUCTION

Henry Adams was speaking of Samoans when he complained, "They've no business to exist unless they mean something, and they won't let me know what they mean."¹ But he might just as well have been speaking of politicians or presidents or any number of other subjects, for a life-long obsession of his was the desire to understand the meanings of things and to put them into their places in relation to all other things. During his career as historian and author, Adams searched for insight into the forces behind things that happened and the laws that explained those happenings and thus made life intelligible. His life-time study he called his education, and American history, particularly in its political manifestations, drew much of his attention and comment. He looked particularly hard at the individual men who became or who strove to become America's leaders--at politicians and statesmen and presidents. He came to consider these men as types, as representative images, with the potential for symbolic significance; thus the type of men who became president might be expected to tell him something about what, if anything, that office meant in the great democratic experiment, about the forces of power that were at work in

¹"To John Hay," 20 January 1891, Henry Adams and His Friends: A Collection of His Unpublished Letters, ed. Harold Dean Cater (Boston: Houghton, 1947), p. 239. Hereafter cited as Cater.

politics, and about the laws Adams thought must control the universe. If those men failed to fulfill their promise, the question to be answered was whether the failure lay in the men themselves, in the office, in American politics, or in the nature of the universe. If they--or some of them--succeeded, then their characters might be expected to indicate both the reason for and the significance of their success.

An examination of Henry Adams' treatment of American presidents, both those he knew as contemporaries and those he knew as historical figures only, provides informative insights into his theory of history, and it also provides evidence of the development of his artistic method. What he sought, what he found and how he gave form to what he found are the questions I shall attempt to answer in this study. My approach has been to examine Adams' depiction of character, that is, the character of men who were presidents, for clues to the connections and continuities that underlie the body of his work. When Adams depicted character, he presented a man's distinctive moral nature and the distinctive qualities of the society that produced him. He might also measure that character by the values of the society that produced it, but more often than not, Adams' judgment of character was based on other values, those of some ideal of statesmanship.

Adams' ironic style, especially as it is evidenced in his use of figurative language and other rhetorical devices, exhibits not so much a chronological line of development as a

pattern of growth when it is explored through his characterization of American presidents in the early essays, The Life of Albert Gallatin, History of the United States of America During the Administrations of Jefferson and Madison, Democracy, his published letters, and The Education of Henry Adams. One thing that becomes progressively clear is that these presidents gained symbolic reality in Adams' depiction of their characters. Following the lead of Melvin Lyon in his study Symbol and Idea in Henry Adams, I have used M.H. Abrams' definition of a literary symbol: "a word or phrase signifying any object [a person, place, or event as well as thing] which itself has significance; that is, the object referred to has a range of meaning beyond itself."² The advantage of this definition is that it does not limit the significance of a symbol to the sort of ambiguity common to Romantic and post-Romantic symbols. Adams' symbols are quite specific in their meanings and can be expressed as concepts, as Adams often did express explicitly.³ This emphasis upon symbols that signify ideas means, not surprisingly, that Adams' symbolism is a kind of rhetorical rather than poetical symbolism, and thus form is subordinate to content.⁴ He simply used

²M. H. Abrams, A Glossary of Literary Terms (New York: Holt, 1963), p. 95.

³Melvin Lyon, Symbol and Idea in Henry Adams (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1970), p. 4.

⁴Lyon, p. 6.

the symbol to illustrate the idea. Only in The Education did he sometimes achieve a more poetic union of idea and form.

The chapters which follow examine Adams' development of a criterion for the ideal statesman and the application of that criterion to a number of American presidents. He turned to both the statesmen he knew as family or friends and to those of the past to help in determining his standard of judgment. His comparisons of the real statesmen with the ideal were not done systematically or exhaustively, rather they appear almost incidentally, but they are usually presented as characterizations that have a role in events that are significant to the author's themes. And since these characterizations of American presidents can be found throughout nearly the entire expanse of Adams' body of work, they provide a key not merely to his themes but to his artistic method as well.

CHAPTER I

WHO AMONG CONTEMPORARY MEN: CHARLES FRANCIS ADAMS, CHARLES SUMNER AND WILLIAM HENRY SEWARD

In The Education of Henry Adams, Adams used the word history in both its usual sense and as a synonym for personal experience, for education. Much of the nation's political history and much of his political education were closely tied to his own family history. As the heir of three generations of statesmen, Adams did not have to search far to find a standard by which to measure the men who sought positions of national leadership. Those men who secured such positions, especially senators and presidents, intrigued Adams. They almost invariably fell short of the ideal, but the workings of political life and the society of politicians and their families exercised a nearly life-long fascination for him, such that in 1901 he was to write his long-time friend Elizabeth Cameron that "One is an oyster, or a coral polyp everywhere; only here [Washington, D.C.] I feel that the water above me is swashing over my head like the surf on a Tahiti coral-reef, while elsewhere the water is dead and rather dirty as though I were inside a lagoon."¹

By accepting the family model as a national ideal, Henry Adams was following a course already traveled by his father,

¹ 25 February 1901, Letters of Henry Adams 1892-1918, ed. Worthington Chauncey Ford (Boston: Houghton, 1938), pp. 317-18. Hereafter cited as Ford, Letters II.

who in 1861 wrote his eldest son, Charles Francis, Jr., that only in his own father, John Quincy Adams, could he see the model "of a full grown statesman that the history of the United States has yet produced."² He went on in the same letter to outline the family principles he hoped to pass on to his sons:

The first and greatest qualification of a statesman in my estimation, is the mastery of the whole theory of morals which makes the foundation of all human society. The great and everlasting question of the right and wrong of every act whether of individual men or of collective bodies. The next is the application of the knowledge thus gained to the events of his time in continuous and systematic way. . . . The feebleness of perception and the deliberate abandonment of moral principle in action are the two prevailing characteristics of public men. . . . No person can even be a thorough partisan for a long period without sacrifice of his moral identity. The skill consists in knowing exactly where to draw the line ³

Their personal integrity and their dedication to the national interest above the interests of party politics were the qualities Henry Adams admired most in his famous ancestors. In the case of his father, however, he was able to admire an additional quality that the grandfather and great-grandfather had lacked--that of an even temperament. He said that his

² Charles Francis Adams, in A Cycle of Adams Letters 1861-1865, ed. Worthington Chauncey Ford (Boston: Houghton, 1920), I, p. 67. Hereafter cited as Ford, Cycle I.

³ Ford, Cycle I, p. 68.

father had "the only perfectly balanced mind" in the family.⁴ Had John Adams and John Quincy Adams had more of that quality, perhaps their presidencies would not have been such low points in their political careers. For the qualities that served the Adamses so well in some areas of their careers, particularly in their diplomatic successes, also served them ill through the loss of popularity and party support.

Whether the Adamses were members of the Federalist, or the Whig, or the Free Soil, or the Republican party, their loyalty to that party was determined by how closely the party line supported the Adamses' position on given issues, and not vice versa. It was their adherence to this principle that led John Adams to attempt to govern as president without following the dictates of party leader Alexander Hamilton. The price he paid was not being re-elected. This same principle led John Quincy Adams to perceive his duty in such a way that he supported President Jefferson's embargo, with the result that he parted from the Federalist party leaders irreconcilably. Charles Francis Adams was to act in much the same way when he and others led the "Conscience" Whigs out of the party over the Mexican War issue.⁵

⁴ Henry Adams, The Education of Henry Adams, ed. Ernest Samuels (Boston: Houghton, 1973), p. 27. Hereafter cited as Education.

⁵ Ernest Samuels, Young Henry Adams (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1967), p. 77. Hereafter cited as Samuels I.

In 1860 Henry Adams was greatly affected by "the spectacle of an honest man in Congress" when his father, then a freshman congressman, refused through sixteen roll calls and two weeks of party pressure to vote along with the other Massachusetts delegates to appoint a printer to the House whose only merit was that his appointment was part of the Republicans' share of the spoils. Adams saw his father's stand as being "the first declaration of the colors we sail under."⁶ Some years later in 1876, he himself played a role in upholding the family tradition when he wrote "The 'Independents' in Canvass" for the October issue of the North American Review. The magazine had a decidedly Republican bias and Adams advised voters to elect the Democratic candidate, Samuel J. Tilden, to the presidency. The article was not only Adams' repudiation of reform politics within the Republican party, but the cause of his resignation as editor of the North American Review as well, for the article offended the magazine's publishers.

Adams apparently took pride in the family political tradition that cost the Adamses so much and frequently left them isolated and thereby relatively powerless to effect the very policies they desired. Despite his admiration of his ancestors' political ideals, he rarely wrote of the Adamses' political activities except for several passages in The Education. This

⁶ Samuels I, p. 68.

restraint was probably due in part to his awareness of the family faults of uncontrollable temper and self-consciousness and to the problem that the presidential terms of John and John Quincy Adams could not be seen as having yielded much practical results to justify the ideals that had motivated the men. Another possible reason for his relative silence was an aesthetic one. More than once he expressed the idea that biographies tend to victimize both their subject and their author, while the kind of narrative and dramatic history he preferred to write did less harm. In 1859 he wrote his brother Charles Francis, Jr., that while editing their grandfather's letters and writing his biography might "be enough for a man, and enough to shape his whole course,"⁷ he (Henry) knew only that he did not have it in him to do "justice" to the family papers.⁸ Forty years later, when reading that same brother's biography of their father, he felt justified in his earlier decision:

Now I understand why I refused so obstinately to do it myself. The biographies are murder, and in this case, to me would be both patri-cide and suicide. They belittle the victim and the assassin equally. They are like bad photographs and distorted perspectives.⁹

⁷ 18 February 1859, Letters of Henry Adams 1858-1891, ed Worthington Chauncey Ford (Boston: Houghton, 1930), p. 12. Hereafter cited as Ford, Letters I.

⁸ 13 March 1859, Ford, Letters I, p. 24

⁹ "To Elizabeth Cameron," 5 March 1900, Ford, Letters II, p. 271.

In 1909, when his younger brother Brooks was planning the biography of John Quincy Adams that Henry and Charles Francis, Jr., had contemplated fifty years earlier, he further elaborated his point by saying that biographies "commonly destroy their hero . . . [for] any truthful biography must always define the hero's limitations, which is fatal to our imaginary ideal."¹⁰

Notwithstanding the lack of direct commentary on the Adams statesmen, it is the position of many Adams scholars that it was Henry Adams' unexpressed but clear purpose in much of his historical writing to vindicate the principles and practices of the family. Some, Peter Shaw in particular in his article "Blood Is Thicker Than Irony," argue that Adams' prejudice led him to consciously distort facts.¹¹ The fact that Shaw's opinion remains unconvincing to most scholars is a tribute to Adams' intellectual integrity. But as J. C. Levenson points out in The Mind and Art of Henry Adams, "a step-by-step defense of inherited opinions may indeed be read in the progress of his historical career."¹² It was in his Life of Albert Gallatin,

¹⁰ 19 March 1909, Cater, p. 649.

¹¹ The New England Quarterly, 40 (June 1967), 163-87.

¹² J. C. Levenson, The Mind and Art of Henry Adams (Boston: Houghton, 1957), p. 21. This particular line of research has also been treated at considerable length in Earl N. Harbert, The Force So Much Closer Home: Henry Adams and the Adams Family (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1977).

however, that Henry Adams took the opportunity to set forth the Adams position on statesmanship, and not in any biography of a family member.

Among his contemporaries, the young Henry Adams found few men outside the members of his own family that he could admire or put political trust in. He had certain expectations of men in politics who had the power to influence the lives of others and the course of events. They should have ideals and be intelligent; they should be patriotic; they should hold themselves aloof from party spoils and broils; they should be pragmatic but sensitive to the need for justice, decency, and honor; they should be competent and act effectively. In choosing a position on any great issue, whether it be civil war, the Reconstruction, monetary policies, or civil service reform, they should not just address themselves to the public opinion of the day but to those few minds in both the present and the future that have as their primary interest the working out of the major problems of human society. This ideal existed only as a model, of course, but some men appeared to come close to the mark.

One of the first politicians to influence Adams in the forming of his ideal and one that was to serve as an object lesson in The Education was Charles Sumner. He, like the Adamses, professed an ethical idealism that caused him to be in an isolated position politically. In the 1840s he became closely associated with Charles Francis Adams, then editor and part owner of the

Boston Whig, an organ for the "Conscience" Whigs. Sumner's public speeches in opposition to slavery gained him fame and censure. He became "the prophet of the movement . . . [Charles Francis Adams] was its skillful, practical persuader."¹³ Sumner was a morally upright man with certain skills as an orator, and though he lacked both personal warmth and a sense of humor, his honesty and courage were admirable.

The young Henry Adams saw him as a political hero. In 1851, when Sumner was elected to the U. S. Senate after a long battle in the Massachusetts legislature, teenaged boys wore black ribbons on their sleeves to signify the tragic consequences that many of the community feared would follow. Henry Adams, in contrast, wore a white ribbon. When Senator Sumner was beaten unconscious at his desk on the Senate floor five years later by a Southerner who took umbrage at his speech on "The Crimes of Kansas," Adams was outraged, along with all of New England. For by that time Sumner no longer stood in the isolated company of a few "Conscience" Whigs. He had become a New England hero and a leader in the new Republican party in those states.

Sumner's connection with the Adams family continued for a while to be an intimate one. His influence was responsible

¹³Elizabeth Stevenson, Henry Adams: A Biography (New York: Macmillan, 1956), p. 5.

for Charles Francis Adams' nomination to the U.S. Congress, and according to Henry Adams' biographer Ernest Samuels, it was Sumner's having studied law abroad that influenced Henry Adams to go to Germany to study law.¹⁴ While Adams was abroad, he corresponded with Sumner, who had shown an interest in his studies, and when Sumner visited Berlin in search of a health resort that would finally bring about his recuperation, they spent time in one another's company. After Sumner went on to France, Adams wrote offering to accompany him in his search for health: "If you will go and travel in Siberia, I will leave German, Law, Latin, and all, and go with you, and take care of you, and see that you don't speak a word of politics or receive a letter or a newspaper for the next two years."¹⁵ The one condition for such a sacrifice on Adams' part was that Sumner resign his Senate seat. Elizabeth Stevenson has suggested in her biography that Adams' motive in making this offer was nothing more than a young man's desire to get free of a bad situation he had wished upon himself, and it is true that Adams, unsuccessful in his attempt to study Civil Law, was unhappy in Germany.¹⁶ But his letters home and the fact that he wrote again to Sumner, delicately suggesting his resignation after receiving Sumner's refusal of

¹⁴Samuels I, p. 53.

¹⁵22 December 1858, Cater, p. 2.

¹⁶Stevenson, p. 22.

Adams' offer to travel with him, indicate that he was also motivated by a genuine concern for Sumner's health and by a desire to have a part in removing Sumner from the political arena at home. There, his slow recovery and an increasing rigidity in his abolitionist stance had begun to worry more moderate Republicans, Charles Francis Adams among them, that Sumner would force the party into such an extreme posture that no reconciliation or compromise with the southern Democrats would be possible. Sumner himself had become such an extremist that he was directly contributing to the ever-increasing danger of secession.

Once Adams returned to the United States and joined his parents in Washington, he was able to watch Sumner's political behavior, and his letters to his brother Charles Francis, Jr., reflected the growing breach between the Adamses and Sumner, a breach that began as political but soon became social as well.

The problems began when Charles Francis Adams as a moderate Republican found himself in the position of trying to prevent an irreconcilable break between the disunionists and the abolitionists in the Congress. He was a member of the Committee of Thirty-Three that had as its goals (1) to prevent disunion if possible; if that could not be achieved permanently, then (2) to prevent disunion at least until the new President, Abraham Lincoln, had assumed his office; or, if that were not possible, (3) to be sure that the Republicans did nothing that would

precipitate a break--so if secession came, it would be due to the southern Democrats. Charles Francis Adams' efforts were heroic, and he was eventually successful, but his worst enemies in the struggle were within his own party and his own Massachusetts delegation.

During the Adamses' first year in Washington, it was Sumner's habit to dine with them weekly. Henry Adams usually mentioned Sumner's presence to his brother in his frequent letters to Boston. By late December, 1860, Adams' tone had begun to display some of his later asperity toward Sumner's vanity:

Sumner . . . was grand as usual, full of the diplomatic corps. He told [John Bassett] Alley a little while ago that of course if he went into the Cabinet it could be only as Secretary of State, and Alley recommended him to give up all idea of it. I think he better.¹⁷

Dining again with the Adamses on the 17th of January, Sumner got involved in an argument with another guest, Preston King, senator from New York, regarding the Committee of Thirty-Three and the New Mexico proposition. The incident provided Henry Adams with an opportunity to continue his analysis of Sumner's character and to depict it through the kind of dramatic contrast he honed into such an accomplished tool in his later writing. Preston King was the foil, "the most amiable, fat old fanatic that ever existed," while Sumner, the thin, ascetic-looking New

¹⁷"To Charles Francis Adams, Jr.," 22 December 1860, Ford, Letters I, p. 69.

Englander, was "always offensive to his opponents; he can't help it." Sumner only orated; he could not argue effectively. But King could argue persuasively, "even when saying things that in Sumner's mouth would be unpardonable." King's position was that compromise was necessary, as the only other option was force, but Sumner said that "the South must be made to bend." At this point, Charles Francis Adams, much to his son's delight, "faced round on him, and hit in, one, two, three, quick as lightning. 'Sumner, you don't know what you are talking about. Yours is the very kind of stiff-necked obstinacy that will break you down if you persevere'" What his father called obstinacy, Henry Adams called vanity: "Sumner always acts with his eye on his personal figure before posterity and our father with his eye on the national future; which, as you see, are two different ends."¹⁸ Adams thought Sumner took his rebuke well, but several days later he wrote that his father had again rebuked Sumner in front of others. Perhaps even this second interchange would have done little to cause an open break between the two, but toward the end of the month the senior Adams gave a speech on the House floor that caused no small stir. He voiced the moderate Republican position, and the radicals, or "ultras" as Adams called them, saw this as a move away from Sumner's leadership to that of William Henry Seward. Although Sumner himself

¹⁸"To Charles Francis Adams, Jr.," 17 January 1861, Ford, Letters I, p. 80.

was apparently not present in the House chamber for the speech, his followers soon informed him of it.

Shortly thereafter what should have been a minor misunderstanding over the appointment of some commissioners became a great impediment to the Massachusetts delegation's unity, and it became evident that a power struggle was unavoidable. As a result, Sumner stopped making social visits to the Adamses' house. Henry Adams wrote his brother that while a majority of the delegation had responded favorably to the speech, Sumner thought "that C.F.A. ruined himself," and with typical pointedness he added, "But Sumner is no great mind in these things. His vanity, or modesty, or what you will, is sensitive as a woman's."¹⁹ This final note was one Adams would sound again in his comments on Thomas Jefferson in the History, and both times he used it, he obviously intended it to convey the judgment that such a sensitivity was misplaced in a statesman.

It was Sumner's rigid adherence against all argument to his extreme position, his refusal to temper his principles with practicality, that created the most difficulties for the Adams faction. Commenting on his stubbornness, Henry Adams said, "As for Sumner, the utmost that can be expected is to keep him silent. To bring him around is impossible. God Almighty couldn't do it."²⁰ The majority of the Massachusetts delegation did

¹⁹8 February 1861, Ford, Letters I, p. 86.

²⁰Ford, Letters I, p. 87.

support Charles Francis Adams' moderate position, so the Committee of Thirty-Three accomplished its goals; but Charles Sumner never aided the political fortunes of the Adams family thereafter. There is reason to suspect that he actively worked against them in Massachusetts and in Washington. For Sumner's friends tried to block Charles Francis Adams' appointment as Minister to Great Britain, and they succeeded in blocking the appointment of John Quincy Adams II to the Boston Customs House. It was Sumner himself who introduced a bill outlawing court dress for American diplomats shortly after the senior Adams' appointment. (Charles Francis Adams apparently did not obey that law when the bill passed.) The victory the moderates won in the Committee of Thirty-Three was but temporary, for the extremists soon had control of the Republican party, and by the end of the Civil War the Adamses once more found themselves isolated within their own party.

In the late 1860s, Henry Adams was once more in Washington where he renewed a friendly acquaintance with Sumner, occasionally dining with him. Yet all his comments on Sumner in private correspondence and in published essays reflect not only a continuing political opposition, but a personal resentment as well. In 1867, for example, he saw his brother John's election success as dealing Sumner and his friends "a distinct and dignified reprimand for the insult they thought proper to put on us last

summer in respect to the custom house."²¹ But on the issues of Reconstruction of the South and foreign policy, Adams spoke even more bitingly. Regarding the defeat of the more humane voices in Reconstruction legislation, Adams charged that Sumner and his followers had "whipped and kicked . . . the whole conservative Liberalism of New England . . . like a mangy spaniel . . . [that] had cowed under the flogging without a growl or even a whine."²² He even went so far as to say in print that Sumner was a travesty of his former self in basing his arrogant Reconstruction legislation on appeals to morality and liberty.²³ For his role in influencing foreign policy, Sumner came under even stronger censure. In a letter to an English friend, Adams called Sumner "a grand Panjandrum . . . , little button and all."²⁴ To Carl Schurz, an important political power among the reform Republicans, he complained that of all the "crazy things" Sumner had done, "and they are many," his speech on the Johnson treaty with England was the "maddest."²⁵ In print Adams could hardly be said to have been more restrained. In an article for the

²¹"To Charles Francis Adams, Jr.," 16 November 1867, Ford, Letters I, p. 136

²²"To Charles Francis Adams, Jr.," 30 April 1867, Ford, Letters I, p. 128.

²³Samuels I, p. 190.

²⁴"To Charles Milness Gaskell," 19 April 1869, Ford, Letters I, p. 156.

²⁵16 May 1871, Ford, Letters I, p. 208.

North American Review on the 1869-1870 congressional session, Adams accused Sumner of being an "omnipotent senatorial authority," of using his powerful position as Senate majority leader and head of the Foreign Relations Committee to "ride rough-shod" over the President and the Secretary of State, and of issuing orders with "almost the authority of a Roman triumvir." The result was a serious "diminution of Executive authority" that actually endangered the government itself.²⁶

Gone from these accounts was any hint of the former relationship of admiring young man for a senior statesman. Gone was any suggestion of friendship or charity toward an old friend. Sumner had set himself up as the spiritual head of the Republican party and as such he was open to attack from Adams' increasingly sure pen. Even his death in 1874 drew no sentimental comment, only the complaint that the party was left with a "nasty" quarrel over succession.²⁷

When writing of Sumner again thirty years after his death, Adams used him as an object lesson. The youthful sarcasm and occasional profanity of the reform journalist gave way to the distinctive irony of the later period, and Adams "invented"

²⁶Henry Adams, "The Session 1869-70," The Great Secession Winter of 1860-61 and Other Essays, ed. George Hochfield (New York: Sagamore Press, 1958), pp. 204-19.

²⁷"To Charles Milnes Gaskell," 26 March 1874, Ford, Letters I, p. 259.

Sumner in order to use him symbolically.²⁸ This was a pattern Adams followed to greater and lesser degrees with a number of characters in The Education of Henry Adams.

The earliest mention Adams made of his rethinking of Charles Sumner's place in his political education came in a letter to Henry James, written from Paris on 18 November 1903. The letter was occasioned by Adams' reading of James' William Wetmore Storey and his Friends. In praising the book, he spoke of their common background:

The painful truth is that all my New England generation . . . were in actual fact only one mind and nature; the individual was a facet of Boston. We knew each other to the last nervous centre, and feared each other's knowledge. We looked through each other like microscopes. . . . There was hardly a difference even in depth, for Harvard College and Unitarianism kept us all shallow. We knew nothing--no! but really nothing! of the world. One cannot exaggerate the profundity of ignorance of Storey in becoming a sculptor, or Sumner in becoming a statesman, or Emerson in becoming a philosopher. Storey and Sumner, Emerson and Alcott, Lowell and Longfellow . . . and all the rest, were of the same mind,--and so poor worm!--was I!

Type bourgeoisie-bostonien! A type quite as good as another, but more uniform. What you say of Storey is at bottom exactly what you would say of Lowell, Motley, and Sumner, barring degrees of egotism. You cannot help smiling at them, but you must smile at us all equally. God knows that we knew our want of knowledge! the self-distrust

²⁸"To John Hay," 30 April 1882, Ford, Letters I, p. 335.

became introspection--nervous self-consciousness--irritable dislike of America, and antipathy to Boston.²⁹

The same year this letter was written, Adams privately printed Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres; and it is certain that by then he was already working on The Education of Henry Adams, which he published privately in 1907. The letter suggests that he was mulling over the representative type of character he would attribute to the "little manikin" persona of The Education and that he had not yet singled Sumner out as the inimitable model of the type. Its tone, though not as harsh as that of The Education, clearly indicates that while he might be severe in his judgment of others, he was just as severe on himself.

Adams' treatment of Sumner in The Education was significant in two ways. It revealed a pattern of character presentation based on autobiographical detail that had often appeared in some earlier written form, and it provided a key to the thematic development of the idea that the education the men of his generation received proved irrelevant to the world they found themselves in. As might be expected, Adams' treatment of his relationship with Sumner was heavily ironic. He began with a description of his worshipful attitude toward the "heroic" Sumner, but as he praised he carefully undercut this "ideal of greatness" whose "only fault" was that as a "model . . . its

²⁹ Ford, Letters II, p. 414.

superiority . . . defied imitation."³⁰ The faulty underpinning was the same vanity he had perceived years earlier: "his solitude was glacial, and reacted on his character. He had nothing but himself to think about. His superiority was, indeed real and incontestable; he was the classical ornament of the anti-slavery party; their pride in him was unbounded, and their admiration outspoken."³¹

Sumner gained symbolic significance for the boy Henry when he provided the "first lesson in practical politics."³² This lesson grew out of an incident in which Sumner, Charles Francis Adams, and their anti-slavery friends refused to compromise with the Massachusetts Democrats so that a pro-slavery Democrat might hold the governorship in return for a seat in the Senate for the Free Soilers. Yet once the bargain was made, Sumner received the "stolen goods": "he [the boy Henry] learned the nature of a flagrantly corrupt political bargain in which he was too good to take part, but not too good to take profit."³³ When the persona of The Education moved to Washington in the winter of 1860-61, Sumner continued to be the focus of his political education as the "only man in Adams' reach [who] seemed to him

³⁰Education, p. 31.

³¹Education, p. 31.

³²Education, p. 49.

³³Education, p. 49.

supremely fitted by knowledge and experience to be advisor and friend . . . [with Senator Sumner] the young man's education began; there it ended."³⁴

Of course, Senator Sumner was not the single source of the persona's nor of Henry Adams' political education. All the other political figures Adams met in his long years as a Washington resident and those he studied in history played their roles as educators. Evidence of the lessons they taught are found throughout Adams' publications and his correspondence. The specific lessons Sumner taught were that a friend in power was a friend lost and that the natural course of a senator was to become egocentric. Such a tendency in senators was, to Adams, a major flaw in the American political system.

Adams' examination of Sumner's character as the New England type gave way to symbolism of the senatorial type in a passage of The Education that described the first meeting of the two men after an eight-year hiatus in their friendship. The meeting was accidental: they simply met on a Washington street. Adams, as the narrative persona, said he had expected the meeting for some time and thus was prepared for it, but Sumner to whom the meeting must have been a surprise--and not one Adams expected him to find agreeable--seemed oblivious to the difficulties that might have prevented a renewal of the old rela-

³⁴Education, p. 107.

tionship of young worshiper at the feet of heroic statesman. Adams was invited to dinner at Sumner's home and treated as a confidant, yet Adams' reaction to his political actions led him to accuse Sumner of ruling "with a high hand,"³⁵ of issuing his "views" as though they were "commands to be disregarded only by traitors," of drivelling when he discussed the Alabama Claims.³⁶ Such behavior led Adams to express "the gravest doubts of Sumner's sanity;"³⁷ at the same time "he learned something--a piece of practical education worth the effort--by watching Sumner's behavior."³⁸ Although he claimed to continue to both like and admire Sumner, he saw his mind as "a pathological study":

Sumner's mind had reached the calm of water which receives and reflects images without absorbing them; it contained nothing but itself. The images from without, the objects mechanically perceived by the senses, existed by courtesy until the mental surface was ruffled, but never became part of the thought. . . . Not that Sumner was more aggressively egoistic than other Senators--Conkling, for instance--but that with him the disease had affected the whole mind; it was chronic and absolute; while, with other Senators for the most part, it was still acute.³⁹

The ideal standard Adams used to measure the politicians of his

³⁵Education, p. 274.

³⁶Education, p. 275.

³⁷Education, p. 275.

³⁸Education, p. 251.

³⁹Education, p. 252.

day had been initially influenced by his hero worship of Charles Sumner, and despite all Sumner's flaws he remained a "great leader" to the extent that he was "the loftiest and most triumphant result of politics."⁴⁰ The recognition that America's "great leaders" did not have to be "burlesqued" by political journalists and historians such as Henry Adams because "they were more grotesque than ridicule could make them"⁴¹ was the sum and total of the "destructive political education" that Henry Adams, as the "little Manikin" in The Education, learned from Charles Sumner the senator.⁴²

The winter of 1860-61 offered Adams more than one political teacher, however, as he himself acknowledged in The Education. William Henry Seward also made a significant contribution to Henry Adams' idea of the ideal statesman. Seward had long been an acquaintance of the Adams family. He was a Republican and a supporter of the anti-slavery group, but he had supported compromise candidates in the Whig party in the presidential races of 1848 and 1852. It was not until the division between radical and moderate within the Republican party in 1859 that Charles Francis Adams became a Seward supporter. Reflecting the family interest in and growing sympathy with Seward, Henry Adams requested that newspaper reports of his speeches be sent to him

⁴⁰Education, p. 281.

⁴¹Education, p. 261.

⁴²Education, p. 281.

in Berlin.⁴³ By fall of the next year he expressed such confidence in Seward that he said he would feel "great relief" on the day he heard that Seward was "quietly elected President of the United States."⁴⁴ At the Republican Convention in Chicago in 1860, Charles Francis Adams supported Seward for the nomination through the third and final ballot. Under Adams' leadership, eighteen of the twenty-six Massachusetts delegates did the same; therefore, it was not surprising that Seward saw in Charles Francis Adams a possible ally against the influence of Charles Sumner, and when he asked Adams' help in unifying the party, Adams agreed to canvass in the Northwest for Abraham Lincoln.⁴⁵ For the next ten years the Adams family's political fortunes were tied to those of Seward.

Once Henry Adams joined his family in Washington, D.C., his letters home to Boston reflected his growing admiration of Seward, whom he had many occasions to see because of the friendly intercourse between the two families. Writing of a number of dinner parties at which he first came to know Seward, he described the senator as "great" and "grand," a "most glorious

⁴³"To Charles Francis Adams, Jr.," 17-18 December 1858, Ford, Letters I, p. 10.

⁴⁴"To Charles Francis Adams, Jr.," 23 November 1859, Ford, Letters I, p. 53.

⁴⁵Samuels I, p. 81.

original."⁴⁶ He was tremendously amused by Seward's eccentricities of appearance and behavior. He thought of Seward, who was a New Yorker, as a new type whose sloppy dress, curses, and public belches were examples of exotic local color. He did not feel restrained from making a joke or two at Seward's expense either, as he reported that he had delighted some young ladies [his sisters] by proposing to paint Seward's face green and his nose yellow, dye his hair red, and exhibit him as a "sage parrot; a bird he wonderfully resembles in manner and profile."⁴⁷

Adams' description of Seward at their first meetings and a later comparison of him with William Pennington, congressman from New Jersey and Speaker of the House, provide evidence of his growing skill with the techniques of character depiction. Of the first meeting he wrote,

. I sat and watched the old fellow with his big nose and his wire hair and grizzly eyebrows and miserable dress, and listened to him rolling out his grand, broad ideas that would inspire a cow with statesmanship if she understood our language. There is no shake in him. He talks square up to the mark and something beyond it.⁴⁸

Comparing Seward with another frequent visitor to the Adams'

⁴⁶"To Charles Francis Adams, Jr.," 9 December 1860, Ford, Letters I, pp. 62-63.

⁴⁷"To Charles Francis Adams, Jr.," 17 January 1861, Ford, Letters I, p. 81.

⁴⁸"To Charles Francis Adams, Jr.," 9 December 1860, Ford, Letters I, p. 62.

home, he said,

He and Seward are two remarkable specimens of the men one meets here. Pennington is a big man and his legs sprawl out over the room and his boots are very prominent and he keeps his knife in his hand opening and shutting it while he talks. Seward sprawls about too, and snorts and belches and does all sorts of outrageous things, but Pennington's talk is feeble and Seward's, though he says the same things, is brilliant from his manner of putting them. He is by far the roughest diamond I've ever seen, and the originality makes half of the attraction.⁴⁹

These passages reveal Adams' eye for color and line, his technique of playing one character off as a foil to another, and his use of animal imagery. Another characteristic evident here, his humor and lightness of touch, did not appear in an article he wrote at about the same time (though it was not published till many years later). His public style would eventually be less formal than it appeared in that article, "The Great Secession Winter of 1860-61."

The extent of the young Adams' admiration for Seward was particularly evident in that early essay which described the efforts of the moderate Republicans to hold their party and the Union together against the onslaughts of the southern "traitors" and the northern "ultras." Adams went so far as to suggest that had Lincoln followed Seward's lead once he came into office, the Civil War might have been avoided. He

⁴⁹"To Charles Francis Adams, Jr.," 29 December 1860, Ford, Letters I, p. 74.

dismissed his own suggestion as unprovable, but he continued to assert that while Seward was virtual ruler of the country before the inauguration, he exhibited an unmatched example of statesmanship:

Those who saw and followed Mr. Seward during all the anxieties and cares of this long struggle are little likely to forget the lessons he then taught them. Cheerful when everyone else was in despair; cool and steady where everyone else was panic-struck; clear sighted where other men were blind; grand in resource where every resource seemed exhausted; guiding by quiet and unseen influences those who seemed to act independently on their own ground; holding the great threads of public policy in his hand without parade or display, and, with his vast power of combination, touching them all with reference only to one clear and definite end; avoiding harsh contact with all men and steering with a firm and steady grasp between his friends who were ready to denounce him, and his enemies who were eager to destroy him . . . yielding without obstinacy where resistance was too great, yet striking with fresh energy wherever resistance seemed weak; pertinacious in his attack, and inexhaustible in his armory of weapons, he fought, during those three months of chaos, a fight which might go down in history as one of the wonders of statesmanship.⁵⁰

It was Seward's self-control that Adams admired most: he provided a sharp contrast to Sumner, "the most frightened man round . . . in believing and repeating all the reports and rumors round town."⁵¹

⁵⁰ Adams, "The Great Secession Winter of 1860-61," The Great Secession Winter and Other Essays, pp. 22-23.

⁵¹ "To Charles Francis Adams," 17 January 1861, Ford, Letters I, p. 80.

If Seward provided the young Adams with the exemplar of statesmanship, he also provided the moment of disillusionment that would become a characteristic of Adams' reactions--as man and as manikin--to the politicians he came to know. After the Adams family arrived in London, Secretary of State Seward sent as his first instructions to the new Minister an "arrogant dispatch," according to the Minister's son Henry, that if obeyed would lead to war with all Europe. He expressed himself as "shocked and horrified by supposing Seward, a man I've admired and respected beyond most men, guilty of so wicked and criminal a course as this." He realized that Seward was probably motivated by the desire to bring about national unity through the threat of a foreign war or that he sought to offset the loss of the southern states through a conflict with European powers that would lead to the acquisition of new territory in Canada and Mexico, but he considered either course sheer "madness."⁵² As Lincoln was not influenced to follow Seward's policy in these matters, nothing came of the affair. But in his letters, Henry Adams wrote less of Seward as model statesman thereafter, though the ties of family and personal friendship were never severed.

The continuing significance of William Seward in Henry

⁵²"To Charles Francis Adams," 11 June 1861, Ford, Letters I, p. 93.

Adams' political education was indicated in two later publications. The first was the essay written for the North American Review in 1876, in which Adams urged Independents and reform Republicans to vote for the Democratic presidential nominee, Samuel J. Tilden. Tilden was Governor of New York, as Seward had been before him. Adams considered him the best man for the job because he had experience in political life and was known to be reform-minded. The characteristics that he was supposed to have which qualified him to hold this high office echoed those virtues Seward demonstrated in the winter of 1860-61:

To fill the Presidential chair with success a man must have a great deal more than those good purposes, fair talents, and high character which serve to make him locally respectable. He must have judgment, firmness, insight, and above all, experience in a much more than ordinary degree; and that he has these is only shown by trial.⁵³

Another lesson Adams learned from Seward, the necessity of party support if a President is to succeed, was expressed in that same essay.⁵⁴

The second, and final, evidence of Seward's role in Adams' political education came in The Education. There he appeared more clearly than elsewhere as a practical politician, a

⁵³Adams, "The 'Independents' in Canvass," The Great Secession Winter and Other Essays, p. 307.

⁵⁴Adams, "The 'Independents' in Canvass," p. 312.

manager and maneuverer of the political machine. With that characteristically ironic tone, Adams suggested that had his father's nature been "cold" he would have followed Mr. Seward and others "in the lines of party discipline and self-interest."⁵⁵ This connection with machine politics allowed Adams to make a thematic digression to the effect that the dependence of Seward and Websters "on others for machine work and money" led the "others" to oust their "employers . . . almost without knowing it" and to create "a machine which no one but themselves could run."⁵⁶ Seward's more important function remained as an example of a new type--that of western New York--and as a sharp contrast to Mr. Sumner:

Politicians thought it unconventionality. Bostonians thought it provincial. Henry Adams thought it charming. From the first sight, he loved the Governor . . . [he] was never petty or personal; his talk was large; he generalized; he never seemed to pose for statesmanship; he did not require an attitude of prayer. What was more unusual--almost singular and quite eccentric--he had some means, unknown to other Senators, of producing the effect of unselfishness.⁵⁷

Adams' relationship to Seward after the Civil War acquired a consequence in The Education it had not had in earlier writings. Upon returning to the United States after eight years in London, Henry Adams (the persona) found Seward to have

⁵⁵Education, p. 29.

⁵⁶Education, p. 49.

⁵⁷Education, p. 104.

changed little, yet to be different. In the characteristically subtle and evocative tone of The Education, he wondered if Seward had finally gotten all the education he wanted or if he had resigned himself to doing without education. He knew only that his "teacher of wisdom," "the great man--the only chief he ever served as a volunteer" seemed to have "closed his account with the public."⁵⁸ This final lesson Adams claimed to have learned from Seward was that once a man's moment for political efficacy had passed, he could only retire from the arena with no expectation of public understanding or appreciation. He had actually learned that lesson from the example of Albert Gallatin; it was simply applicable to Seward in retrospect.

Adams' youthful acquaintance with Sumner and Seward provided him with more than the lessons in political education he enumerated. In his delineation of their characters, he further defined the criteria of the ideal statesman at the same time he began to examine the nature of the American politician's success and failure.

To a considerable degree, Sumner had the moral integrity that John Quincy Adams had thought the greatest qualification of a statesman, and he applied his ethics to his actions as a politician, but he could not temper his principles with practicality. He was an honest man, but he was self-deceived,

⁵⁸Education, pp. 246-47.

as he illustrated when he refused to act directly in a political deal but accepted a Senate seat that was part of the spoils from that deal. He enjoyed some influence within his party in the later years of his career, but Adams saw that success as ironically proportional to his personal failures. Over the years as his personal vanity increased, his attachment to national interests decreased. By Adams' standards, he failed personally and professionally as a result of flaws in his own character.

Seward succeeded to a greater degree in both areas. He too had the right ideals, but he was far more willing to compromise principle in order to gain practical results. Even John Quincy Adams had acknowledged the necessity of compromise if one were to be able to act effectively. Of course, the difference between being an effective statesman and a political hack lay in knowing "where to draw the line." Seward was competent and could act effectively. He was intelligent, good tempered and resourceful. Perhaps most important of all, he had self-control. But his ability as a practical politician, however necessary it was for a man to have party support if he were to be effective, was also the source of whatever flaws his character exhibited. He could not, in accord with the Adams' ideal, keep aloof from the intrigues, the political maneuvers, and the patronage of party politics.

A consideration of the lives of his Adams forebears,

Charles Sumner, and William Henry Seward led Henry Adams early in his career to define four qualities of statesmanship: (1) proper motives, (2) balanced temperament, (3) personal integrity, and (4) the ability to think clearly and act boldly. Further consideration of these men and others led Adams to see a pattern in the life of every political figure whereby--through his own nature, his society, or other forces beyond his control--he was sorely tried, was misunderstood, lost power, and became disillusioned. That pattern of failure eventually became a metaphor for the human condition in his final major work--The Education of Henry Adams.

CHAPTER II

THE HISTORIC IDEAL: ALBERT GALLATIN

In 1877, at the request of Albert Gallatin's only surviving son, Adams undertook the writing of a biography and the editing of the senior Gallatin's papers. In so doing he found the figure and the occasion for defining at length and in detail the ideal type of the American statesman as he had appeared in a past era. Some years after the book's publication, at a time when he was very much involved in writing his history of the Jeffersonian period, Adams wrote Samuel J. Tilden to thank him for a favorable review of the biography.¹ In that letter he asserted that "after long study of the prominent figures in our history, I am more than convinced that for combination of ability, integrity, knowledge, unselfishness and social fitness, Mr. Gallatin has no equal."² He was, in effect, the kind of man who should have become President.

At the time Albert Rolaz Gallatin suggested the project, the Adamses and the Gallatins were no longer personally acquainted, but when he wrote Adams he acknowledged the families' past connections:

[I] had not been able to find anyone competent to write his history and with whom I was willing to trust his papers. Your

¹Henry Adams, The Life of Albert Gallatin (1879; rpt. New York: Peter Smith, 1943). Hereafter cited as Gallatin.

²24 January 1883, Cater, p. 126.

name of Adams was all sufficient for me to place the most implicit confidence in your discretion, integrity and talents.³

Though a Jeffersonian Republican and a man whose motives had been suspect to John and Abigail Adams, the senior Gallatin had been particularly respected by John Quincy Adams, who had served with him in negotiating the Treaty of Ghent. In later years Gallatin and a son who was also in banking in New York received praise from the Adamses for following certain fiscal policies regarding payments in specie and government loans. So the attitude between the families was one of mutual respect.

For some years previous to his taking on the Gallatin project, Adams had been teaching history at Harvard College and editing the North American Review. The biography provided him an excuse for leaving these two activities, with which he had begun to feel bored, and returning to Washington to do research in the government archives. The result of two years of writing was three volumes of edited papers and one very long volume of biography. His Harvard years had made him a scholar, and the Gallatin did much to establish him as a historian.

The form of the biography, however, was almost clumsy

³Gallatin's letter is quoted in Ernest Samuels, Henry Adams: The Middle Years (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard Univ. Press, 1958) p. 42. Hereafter cited as Samuels II.

when compared to that of later works, and the style was encumbered by a literary method that interspersed many extended quotations among bits of narrative line and authorial comment. The prose was weighed down by sentence structures that might contain dozens of lines of clauses joined by semicolons. Missing from this work were the images that gave lightness and breadth to his later style. He worked too much with the idea of certain emotional conditions in his characters, but was not yet able to re-create the dramatic intensity of those emotions in his prose.⁴ The occasional character sketches he had used in his early articles were short and usually satirical. But the character of Gallatin as Adams saw it was so sober and practical-minded as to allow little room for a light or satiric pen.⁵ Even the irony of the Gallatin was deadly serious and not sharply witty as Adams' irony came characteristically to be.

The stylistic limitations of the book were primarily due to its being an experiment of sorts in historical technique. Adams had been given access to thousands of pages of important unpublished material from private papers and government files. Because he sought to establish a precedent for American historians in the use of such resources, the Gallatin was

⁴Levenson, p. 96.

⁵William H. Jordy, Henry Adams: Scientific Historian (New Haven, Conn.: Yale Univ. Press, 1952) p. 65.

thoroughly documented. So carefully was the narrative supported by references to and quotations from the original documents that reviewers responded in one of two ways. Some criticized the volume for its physical bulk, its small print and narrow margins, and its excessive use of quotation--some in untranslated French. Others, apparently awed, praised Adams' scholarship without giving evidence of having read beyond it to the sense of the text.⁶ The biography's failure to get a significant response from critics and reading public alike must have been a disappointment to Adams, but the decision to make the Gallatin a sort of compendium was clearly a conscious one. Adams opened the preface with these words: "A large part of the following biography relates to a period of American history as yet unwritten, and is intended to supply historians with materials which, except in such a form, would be little likely to see the light."⁷ Adams himself used the Gallatin as a sourcebook when he came to write his multi-volumed History of the United States of America During the Administrations of Jefferson and Madison.⁸ The Gallatin also provided Adams with the literary method he would use in the

⁶Stevenson, p. 164.

⁷Gallatin, p. iii.

⁸Henry Adams, History of the United States During the Administrations of Jefferson and Madison, 9 vols. (1891-96; rpt. New York: Antiquarian Press, 1962). This work will hereafter be referred to in the text of this dissertation as the History, and it will be cited in footnotes by that same shortened title plus the appropriate volume and page number.

History--but there it appeared greatly improved.

In writing the biography, Adams had additional ambitions. In a series of lectures on American history between 1789 and 1840, which he gave while still at Harvard, he proposed that the Republicans had not only adopted many of the very policies they had condemned the Federalists for, but had even surpassed them in the use of federal power. He also indicated that the country had emerged from the War of 1812 with a considerably increased national unity.⁹ He saw the period of Gallatin's active political life as being a crucial time in which the country determined its national character, and he considered Gallatin the most admirable public man of the period. The times had been auspicious; the man had been great; the country had emerged richer, stronger and more clearly a unified nation: yet the reversal by which the Federalists came to advocate states' rights and the Republicans assumed Hamiltonian ideas of national power, was more than a historical irony. For Adams, it attested to the failure of a whole philosophical system of democratic government.¹⁰ It also changed Albert Gallatin into a disappointed and disillusioned man. In the biography Adams set out to give not only an accurate record of a life, but to account for and evaluate the development of an ethical and responsible

⁹Samuels II, p. 43.

¹⁰A detailed treatment of the theme of failed Republican idealism is found in Melvin Lyon's Symbol and Idea in Henry Adams and in George Hochfield, Henry Adams: An Introduction and Interpretation, American Authors and Critics Series (New York: Barnes-Noble, 1962).

man who acquired the ability to shape national destiny through political power and lost it. He wanted to indicate in his narrative what Gallatin had done right, what had gone wrong, and how Gallatin had responded to failure. In so doing he added to his grandfather's idea that statesmanship began in morality and that the study of history was intended to provide individuals with edifying models. He focused on social groups as well, and he began to suggest that there was some inexorable law in the universe stronger than the will of individuals.

Admirable in character and courageous in action, Albert Gallatin was clearly a man of high principles whose special talents made him a fitting symbol for the exemplification of Henry Adams' political ideals. The advantages of his family background caused Adams to praise his "social fitness." His family was particularly well connected and had a long history of public service to the republic of Geneva. Although orphaned at an early age, Gallatin was well looked after by various family members who placed particular emphasis on his education and his moral training. While not wealthy, he was not entirely without means, and at the age of twenty-five he received a modest patrimony. He had breeding and intelligence, and had he stayed in his native Geneva he would have had family position and influence as well. But he chose to break with the past, influenced along with his closest friends by the tide of eighteenth-century rationalism. He and his friends decided to

immigrate to the wilds of North America. Adams considered this decision a foolish one:

There is no reason to suppose that Albert Gallatin's career was more brilliant or more successful in America than with the same efforts and with equal sacrifices it might have been in Europe; for his character and abilities must have insured pre-eminence in whatever path he chose. Both the act of emigration and the manner of carrying it out were inconsiderate and unreasonable.¹¹

Gallatin's lack of consideration was in the form of not communicating regularly with his relatives--his "one domestic fault."¹² His unreasonableness took the form of not asking his rich relatives for money when he needed it, not using his letters of introduction once he arrived in his new country and not choosing to settle in an urban area. Such criticism was intended to do more than temper Adams' praise of Gallatin. He wished to show that even though Gallatin turned away from his opportunities, he was bound to succeed: "Success, more or less brilliant, was as certain as anything in this world can be."¹³ What Adams seemed to have posited by his reference to Gallatin's "social fitness" was his capacity for being a member of the politically elite. While still an undergraduate at Harvard College, Adams had been agreeably impressed by the thesis of

¹¹Gallatin, p. 18.

¹²Gallatin, p. 26.

¹³Gallatin, p. 25.

one of his texts: "There will always arise and exist a certain number of great individual superiorities who will seek an analogous place in government to that which they occupy in society."¹⁴ He echoed this sentiment in a letter to his brother when he suggested that they and other like-minded young men across the country form a sort of school (a modern "think-tank") to bring about political reform and end corruption. It was an idea which appeared again in The Education.

A second point Adams made in treating Gallatin's youth was that his eventual political failure was actually the consequence of his very virtue: he was a man of high principle, but those principles were influenced by the age that produced him, the age of Rousseau and Jefferson. He was imbued with the spirit of the age. He believed, like the presidents he served, that human beings were reasoning, moral creatures that would rule themselves peacefully and would prosper if they were not interfered with by too much government. What government might be needed to look after the people's interests was best provided on a local rather than a national level; but a federal government should not engage in public debt or taxation; it should protect the country from foreign invasion and settle disputes between states, but not infringe on those states' rights. In

¹⁴Ernest Samuels quotes this line from Guizot's History of the Origin of Representative Government in Europe, a textbook in Adams' undergraduate history course. Samuels I, p. 30.

fulfilling its role, the federal government should adhere strictly to the powers it was given in the Constitution.¹⁵ Gallatin based his principles on these beliefs.

During his years in office, Gallatin was forced by circumstances to take actions at considerable variance with his principles. But it was not in those Jeffersonian principles that Adams saw his political ideal; in Gallatin's practical responsiveness to the demands of the situations in which he found himself, Adams found the flexibility combined with integrity and unselfishness he had not found in others.

Having come to America in 1780, Gallatin had settled in western Pennsylvania where the harsh life cost him a young wife within months of marriage and never brought him prosperity. Though he personally stood up well to the hardships of frontier life, his wife's death probably drove him into political activity as a distraction. His political career began when he attended a conference held at Harrisburg on 3 September 1788 that sought to reform the national Constitution. The next year he was chosen as a delegate to the state constitutional convention; he was elected to the state legislature in 1790 and to the Senate three years later. The central crisis of those early years was the furor that arose over an excise tax on whiskey.

¹⁵David R. Contosta, Henry Adams and the American Experiment (Boston: Little, Brown, 1980), p. 66.

The tax was peculiarly objectionable to the inhabitants of western border counties. Unable to get their grain to market easily, they distilled it into a product with better keeping qualities. The excise was considered unfair because it taxed a higher portion of a westerner's crop yield than an easterner's, and because it greatly decreased cash flow in an area when there was already little. Because he represented one of those western counties, Gallatin was present at meetings where angry citizens resolved to resist the enforcement of the excise to the limits of the law. Although he did not approve of the group's resolutions, he did act as clerk, and later he acknowledged his responsibility in what had happened. He did nothing "illegal nor criminal," but he regretted his association as "my only political sin."¹⁶ Gallatin's role in the "Whiskey Rebellion" was important in three ways. First, it provided the Federalists with an opportunity to suggest that Gallatin was politically tainted by treasonous behavior. They never proved anything against him; however, this was only his first lesson in what Adams called an education in political adversity.¹⁷ Second, it allowed Gallatin the opportunity to reveal his integrity. He considered his actions reprehensible because the

¹⁶ Gallatin, p. 92.

¹⁷ Gallatin, p. 89.

group he acted as clerk for resolved to "treat with contempt" and "hold no communication with" any men who accepted the offices of excise tax collectors.¹⁸ Gallatin's judgment was that "by attempting to render the office contemptible, they tended to diminish that respect for the execution of the laws which is essential to the maintenance of a free government."¹⁹ Third, it provoked an incident at Brownsville where Gallatin outfaced a group of drunken, angry frontiersmen with a degree of physical courage to match his moral courage.²⁰

Gallatin's courage became a unifying theme throughout the biography, and once Adams began the series of comparisons of Gallatin and Jefferson that comprises much of the mid-section of the work, it was in their courage that he suggested the greatest difference lay.

The first time Gallatin was elected to the United States Senate, he sat for only a few weeks as his brief period of citizenship was seen to disqualify him. But because of his action at Brownsville, he came to be "considered by friend and foe as the embodiment of the principles of law and order . . . it was believed that to his courage and character the preservation of peace was due."²¹ So he was re-elected to the state

¹⁸Gallatin, p. 92.

¹⁹Gallatin, p. 92.

²⁰Gallatin, p. 136.

²¹Gallatin, p. 141.

legislature and nominated to the U.S. Senate again. The elections were declared illegal, and Gallatin found that the tactics of the Federalists to remove him from the political arena served only to give him "a prodigious hold upon his party; he had the unusual good fortune of being twice made a martyr of a mere political persecution."²²

Once safely in the Senate, Gallatin played the role of the opposition well. His success at debate was considerable, but he did not stop there. He followed up with hard work and hard study. His watchfulness was so effective as to make the Federalists govern better in order to avoid his criticism:

. . . that such a man under such circumstances should have at once seized the leadership of his party, and retained it with firmer and firmer grasp down to the last moment of his service; that he should have done this by the sheer force of ability and character, without ostentation and without the tricks of popularity; that he should have had his leadership admitted without a dispute, and should have held it without a contest, made a curious combination of triumphs. . . . Mr. Gallatin seldom indulged in personalities. His temper was under almost perfect control. His power lay in courage, honesty of purpose, and thoroughness of study. Undoubtedly his mind was one of rare power, perhaps for this especial purpose the most apt that America has ever seen; a mind for which no principle was too broad and no detail too delicate. . . . [H]e was an ideal party leader uniting boldness with caution, good temper with

²²Gallatin, p. 142.

earnestness, exact modes of thought with laborious investigation, to a degree that has no parallel in American experience.²³

His skill as a party leader was due in part to his having been foreign-born. As a result, he had a stronger allegiance to national interests than to those of state or sector. Another factor in his success was that he was willing to take bolder action than his predecessor, Madison, had been. He acted out of self-confidence and out of confidence in the rightness of his principles. His being an economist was an additional factor in his success. These characteristics combined to make him so valuable to his party that he was re-elected even when he declined to run on the grounds of pressing business affairs and his second wife's desire that he get out of politics. He was "in a manner compelled to remain in public life."²⁴ That fact appealed strongly to Henry Adams' view that the best statesmen or politicians were those who would rather be elsewhere than in public office.

Adams saw Gallatin as such a powerful figure that he was practically responsible for getting Jefferson elected, and once the Republicans were in office, he as Secretary of the Treasury, Madison as Secretary of State, and Jefferson as President shared

²³ Gallatin, pp. 154-55.

²⁴ Gallatin, p. 210.

the power and the responsibility as a "triumvirate."²⁵ His theory of the noble aims of democracy and his sense of economy endeared him to Jefferson; his sense of economy and his pure, unselfish and noble methods endeared him to Adams.

At the beginning of the Jefferson presidency, Gallatin believed that the new form of government the Republicans represented would allow human nature to develop along improved lines and that new America would not have to deal with the faults and failures of old Europe. Jefferson's first administration had only two aims: (1) to reduce the national debt and (2) to reduce taxes in relation to the reduction of the debt.²⁶ Through Gallatin's genius, both goals were accomplished, and Adams attributed Jefferson's enormous popularity to the success of the Secretary of Treasury. During the second administration they hoped to "make one comprehensive, permanent provision for the moral and economic development of the people."²⁷ Jefferson had the vision of a new America, but not the resourcefulness to bring it into reality. Gallatin, who shared this vision, was the man to bring it into being. And they almost succeeded. But because the success of their system demanded peace, they failed.

Adams asserted numerous times that the defeat of the Jeffersonian ideal resulted primarily from forces over which

²⁵Gallatin, p. 269.

²⁶Gallatin, p. 276.

²⁷Gallatin, p. 354.

neither Gallatin, nor Jefferson, "nor any other man or combination of men, neither his policy nor any other policy or resource of human wisdom, could control."²⁸ There were, however, faults within the system and the men which contributed to the fatal circumstances of the embargo and the War of 1812. The first of these was that the system was too rigid. It was so much a matter of high principle that it did not allow its partisans the flexibility to change with changing times. Gallatin had that kind of flexibility, which is why he could do as much for his country as he did; Jefferson did not, which is why he sometimes appeared indecisive, equivocating and even cowardly. Thus Gallatin was, according to Adams, actually the source of Jefferson's strength.

A second fatal flaw in the Jeffersonian system was that it was based on a fundamental misreading of human nature--that people ruled themselves by reason and not by instinct and human passion.

The first of these flaws, the rigidity of the system, led the Republicans to difficulties over the constitutionality of the Louisiana Purchase. Jefferson felt that the purchase of new territory was unconstitutional and could only be made legal by a constitutional amendment. As a congressman, Gallatin had resisted the growth of Executive power, yet he advised Jefferson that the United States did have an inherent right

²⁸Gallatin, p. 355.

to acquire territory, and this policy was adopted. Another problem which revealed the growing gap between Republican principle and Republican practice was the need for far-reaching federal powers to enforce the embargo. The Republicans asked Congress for--and got--powers much broader than the very ones they had chided the Federalists for requesting a few years earlier. (The Federalists, in contrast, came full circle and must have been surprised at finding themselves assuming the old Republican position of states' rights!) A third problem grew out of Jefferson's aversion to a national bank and an adequately armed navy. The principles Jefferson clung to made him see the bank as unconstitutional and as having an undesirable tendency to centralize national finances. The navy he sought to strengthen, but he actually weakened it by spending millions on building two hundred small gunboats that turned out--as Gallatin expected--to be totally useless. Between his animosity toward the bank and his dedication to his "hobby-horse" gunboats, Jefferson nearly bankrupted the treasury before the War of 1812 actually began.²⁹ Gallatin responded thusly to the difficulties of Jefferson's second administration:

The use of arbitrary, odious, and dangerous means having been decided upon by his party and by Congress, and he being the instrument to employ these means, he did employ

²⁹Gallatin, p. 353.

them conscientiously as he had formerly opposed them, not because they were his own choice, but because he could see no alternative.³⁰

He did not let his regrets over lost ideals unman him, and as his disappointments grew he continued to be an efficient planner and administrator. But, as Adams pointed out,

There can be no more painful task to a man of high principle than to do what Mr. Gallatin was doing. Not only was he obliged to abandon the fruit of his long labors, and to see even those results that had seemed already gained suddenly cast in doubt, but he was obliged to do this himself by means which he abhorred . . . he uttered no complaints, but accepted responsibility and kept silence.³¹

The second flaw in the system--the misreading of human nature--led to two kinds of difficulties. One stemmed from a schism within the Republican party itself over politically motivated removals from office; the other, from Madison's and Jefferson's inability to persuade themselves that the British government actually meant the acts of war it perpetrated against the persons and property of American citizens. The removals from office that resulted from local and personal politics within his own party disgusted Gallatin to such a degree that he removed himself from the controversy and lost considerable political influence thereby. Madison as well as

³⁰Gallatin, p. 373.

³¹Gallatin, p. 372.

Gallatin suffered from the selfishness and prejudice of local politicians who eventually organized a senatorial opposition to the two. Jefferson compromised with these senators as best he could, but his personal loyalty to Gallatin suffered considerably by comparison with Gallatin's to him: "As usual Mr. Gallatin was the one to suffer for the mistakes of his chief."³² Seeking personal power, this group of senators eventually contrived to bring about Gallatin's fall from political power; they rejected both the Embargo and outright war, but were helpless to come up with an alternative. So they achieved "much of the expense of war and all the practical disgrace of submission. . . . [And they left] The country . . . thoroughly at the mercy of events."³³ Even after the Congress declared itself for war, that same group of senators resisted Gallatin's leadership to such a degree that then-President Madison's war policy was affected.

The problem of the inability of the Virginia presidents to believe in the sincerity of English belligerency made little difference in the outcome of events, as Minister Canning saw that the British interests were in the suppression of American commerce and the retrieval of British seamen from American ships. No matter what Jefferson or Madison thought--or did--

³²Gallatin, p. 354.

³³Gallatin, p. 397.

the British would have acted pretty much as they did, according to Adams. What did happen as a result of Jefferson's and Madison's believing the English were really willing to be friends was a great deal of diplomatic activity that invariably left one or both of them looking foolish. Only Gallatin seemed to offer a consistent policy. Adams said that both the inconsistent and the consistent policy would have had the same results, but the option was one of looking foolish in disaster or looking dignified. He considered the latter preferable. It was Jefferson's lack of physical and moral courage that Adams presented as his greatest difference from Gallatin, and this distinction clearly pointed up the superiority of one man to the other. Adams accused Jefferson of abdicating six months before he went out of office:

Mr. Jefferson, overwhelmed by all these difficulties, longed for the moment of his retreat. . . . So cowed was he as to do what no President has a constitutional right to do; he abdicated the duties of his office, and no entreaty could induce him to resume them.³⁴

But while Jefferson might feel "the solid earth reel under him and his courage [flee] . . . Gallatin was made of different stuff. In his youth almost as sanguine as Mr. Jefferson, he knew better how to accept defeat and adapt himself to

³⁴Gallatin, p. 376.

circumstances, how to abandon theory and to move with his generation"35 That Gallatin was the kind of man presidents should be Adams ~~showed~~ through his method of character presentation.

Adams' letters from the period reveal that by the time he wrote the Gallatin, he was already fascinated by character in its modern sense of personality, as well as its classical sense of moral purpose. The technique of character depiction he developed in the Gallatin combined the use of numerous extracts from an individual's own writing with a sort of "Plutarchian pairing."³⁶ He was to use that technique much more effectively and skillfully in the History; but despite infelicities of style, Adams had already begun to speak with his characteristic tone.

In the Gallatin and later works, Adams spoke as teacher and student. As teacher he sought to teach through criticism, and though he tried to sympathize with many of his characters, it was not his nature "to admire without qualification."³⁷ He held public men up to a "ruthless requirement that anyone who challenges publicity, should stand up to it and shrink from no assertion of his personality."³⁸ Only if bad statesmen were

³⁵Gallatin, p. 379.

³⁶Richard Gerald Androne, "Characterization and Narration in the Works of Henry Adams: The Last Sophistication," Diss. Univ. of Pennsylvania 1978, p. 28.

³⁷"To Mabel Hooper La Farge," 2 May 1897, Cater, p. 405.

³⁸"To Anna Cabot Mills Lodge," 21 June 1910, Ford, Letters II, p. 543.

exposed and satirized could the public be educated to recognize and remove from office the rascals and fools. As a student, Adams enjoyed "the dissecting room," where "after studying the scope of any mind" he could "study its limitations," from which he claimed he could tell more than from that mind's "extensions."³⁹

As a student of character in the Gallatin, Adams began what turned out to be a rather inconclusive study of the role of individual free will as a force of history. He was much more successful as a teacher. He set Gallatin up as a representative type--the ideal statesman, and against that standard he took Thomas Jefferson's measure. Where Gallatin was an economist and a diplomat, Jefferson was not. Where Gallatin was morally and physically courageous, Jefferson was less so. Where Gallatin was not only intelligent but given to thorough study and laborious investigation, Jefferson was visionary and vaguely, impractically philosophical. Where Gallatin was efficient and resourceful, Jefferson was not. Where Gallatin was successful at debate, Jefferson was not an effective speaker. Where Gallatin preferred to lose control of his party rather than stoop to political intrigues, Jefferson became embroiled in patronage squabbles. Where Gallatin balanced boldness of action with caution, Jefferson remained merely cautious. Where

³⁹"To Oliver Wendell Holmes," 4 January 1885, Cater, pp. 134-35.

Gallatin maintained a strong allegiance to national interest, Jefferson was torn by his own sectional bias. Where Gallatin always acted responsible even when compelled to stay in public life though he wanted to get out, Jefferson clung to his popularity desperately, then abandoned his duties and responsibilities abruptly. Or so Adams asserted, but his method and purpose led him in the Gallatin and the History to describe more or less the same behavior as flexibility in Gallatin and inconsistency in Jefferson, which certainly fueled the fires of such critics as saw "family bias" in his work.

As a historian, Henry Adams attempted to maintain what he chose to call a "scientific" objectivity in his writings, but he was a moralist and an artist as well.⁴⁰ As such, he had purposes beyond the factual depiction of events. In later years when Henry Adams jokingly claimed to have "invented Jefferson, Gallatin and Burr," he referred to the techniques of characterization he used in order to make his subjects symbolically adequate.⁴¹ His characterizations of Gallatin and Jefferson clearly reveal a simplification of their natures in order to intensify and dramatize two themes he was to develop further in the History and The Education. Adams

⁴⁰Those critics who maintain that Adams' historical writings were little more than an apologia for his family's political failures would see only authorial prejudice where the present writer sees artistic license.

⁴¹"To John Hay," 30 April 1882, Ford, Letters I, p. 335.

took the position that once in power, the Republican party of 1800 was forced by circumstances to adopt the Federalist principles it had condemned. Albert Gallatin became, for Adams, not only an edifying model of the ideal statesman, but a symbol of all that was good in the Jeffersonian system and a "test case for human ability and intelligence."⁴² Though Gallatin retired as very much the eminent statesman, widely esteemed and comfortably well-off, Adams clearly considered him a failure because the ideals he believed in proved illusory when he tried to make them real. But the failure was national as well as personal. The Republican ideal failed because the nature of reality was such that circumstances could and did outweigh principles. Gallatin failed as an individual, but not because of any serious flaw in his own nature or action: "It may be doubted whether he ever made a mistake in any of his undertakings, and whether any work done by him has ever been found inefficient"⁴³ What Adams wanted to show was that Gallatin's failure in America was due to the fact that America is the effectual place of mediocrity, not of superiority such as his: Gallatin himself was a believer in but not a product of democracy.

The Gallatin and the History were not the last works in

⁴²Harbert, p. 115.

⁴³Gallatin, p. 491.

which Adams used the failure of the individual symbolically to represent the failure of the system which produced him or utilized his skills--that theme pervades The Education. But also echoing through those earlier works there is another motif as well and that is Adams' ambiguous treatment of the success and failure of Americans of his own generation. On one level Gallatin had succeeded in the eyes of the world by acquiring and retaining for a time a great amount of power. Adams attributed this relative success to Gallatin's superior personal qualities and to his being somehow in tune with the forces at work in the stream of American history. When he failed in the eyes of the world by losing party influence and by not being nominated to succeed Jefferson or Madison as President, it was not so much a personal failure as a national one. In the new age of economic materialism, a man of Gallatin's superior qualities and education became irrelevant. In the nineteenth century, the world recognized the success of the business tycoon and the machine politician. Speaking of his own generation, Adams assessed the effect of materialistic democracy thusly: "The only well-educated and successful boys I ever knew were those who were kicked and cuffed most, and least educated. Selfishness is the only strong spring of success."⁴⁴ Adams would not even allow Gallatin or men like

⁴⁴"To Mable Hooper LaFarge," 9 March 1902, Cater, p. 520.

him much credit for the relative success they had. He indicated that sometimes men of superior abilities did appear to affect the course of history, but then so did little men with small motives. More and more in his later writings Adams expressed the opinion that only so long as a man was in accord with the direction and forces of energies already at work could he be successful in a worldly sense. In 1904, shortly before beginning to write The Education, Adams expressed the following view on causation to his friend John Hay: "the man who in critical times appears to be guiding events is merely the medium for the direction of Energy!"⁴⁵

Paradoxically, after Adams had qualified Gallatin's success into failure by implying that Gallatin was a mere instrument of forces beyond his control--when he was not indeed their victim--Adams went further and suggested that only when Gallatin lost power did he actually exhibit the degree of free will a man of integrity might exert in this world. Speaking to a fellow writer about "enjoying failure" soon after he completed The Education, Adams wrote:

It [praise] rather surprises me, for I don't much care for scientific writing, which is always mere carpentry. What excites our imagination is narrative--drama. There the difficulties become infinite, and the question of putting a light or a shadow, a discord or a harmony, in its right place, is all the

⁴⁵Samuels III, p. 326.

more fascinating because we know no reader will ever reach the point of knowing enough art to see why we do it, and why your failure is worth far more than success.⁴⁶

It was Adams' theory that the eighteenth century had been a political age and that the nineteenth had been an economic one. Thus it was that those most in tune with democratic forces sought and attained material success. In so doing, he further suggested, they lost moral and intellectual qualities. Men such as Gallatin--and Adams himself--failed in a larger sense than the others succeeded in because of what they had striven to do. Worldly success came to mean true failure in Adams' eyes--as he illustrated in his treatment of Theodore Roosevelt in The Education--and "failure" was often a metaphor for a certain kind of success.

⁴⁶"To George Cabot Lodge," 8 March 1909, Cater p. 642.

CHAPTER III

THE VIRGINIA SCHOOL: THOMAS JEFFERSON AND JAMES MADISON

Two months before completing the final chapter of the History, Henry Adams wrote his friend Elizabeth Cameron, "We none of us know our whole genius till we've been tried."¹ How well those words applied to Adams himself in the writing of his monumental study and to the chief protagonist of that study as well, Thomas Jefferson. Adams had already been deep into plans for a multi-volumed history of the United States between 1800 and 1817 when he published his biography of Gallatin in 1879. The History of the United States During the Administrations of Jefferson and Madison was the fruition of ten year's labor. It displayed the full range of Adams' learning and his mature literary skills. Although it did not receive the great popular acclaim of Gibbon's Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire which Adams probably wished for it, it did secure him an enduring reputation as an important American historian and author.

His earlier studies of Gallatin and John Randolph had convinced Adams that the period of the Jefferson and Madison administrations was a turning point in American history. It had been an age of statesmanship, and when it ended, a political age gave way to the economic age that followed. In

¹ 15 July 1888, Ford, Letters I, p. 390.

1800 America had been little more than a colonial entity; by 1817 it had become a nation. In the History Adams explored the manner in which the change had come about. In addition, he examined the development of American character and the success of the Jeffersonian experiment in republicanism.

In setting up his organization, Adams used a framing device that reflected his concern with the country's changing nature. The first six chapters described the United States in 1800 and the problems it faced. The next eight volumes narrated the political events (in the sense of executive, legislative, judicial, diplomatic, and military actions) of the next seventeen years. The final four chapters of the ninth volume returned to the theme of the country's development and its success in dealing with the problems of 1800.

The primary problem facing the United States in 1800 was a lack of unity. The country was enormous and completely without efficient means of transportation or communication. Difficulties of mere distance were complicated by differences in the population which led to a provincial contempt for outlanders. Influenced by differences in geography, climate and culture, citizens often attached their strongest loyalties to their section of the country rather than to the country itself. People in New England, for example, became a hearty and independent type as a result of their adjustment to the harsh weather and rocky soil. Their Puritan forebears left

them a legacy of religious intolerance which they took as their own. Southerners had rich soil and a warm climate, which allowed them to prosper in agrarian pursuits where New Englanders took first to the sea and then to manufactures. But the very ease of their lives led to the development of their most serious character flaws when compounded by the commonly held belief that southerners, particularly Virginians, were descendants of English aristocrats. Adams praised southerners for their good manners and warm hospitality, but he condemned them for their sloth, lack of self-discipline, excessive pride and contempt for people and things not southern. The middle states, Pennsylvania and New York in particular, shared with the South the advantage of having good, rich farm land, but their climate was less debilitating as it was more temperate, and their combination of navigable rivers with good harbors was an advantage they shared with no other section of the country. The people of the area were influenced by early precedents of religious tolerance and the presence of long-established cities. The middle states became an area where commerce prospered, where cities grew as financial interest grew, and where political moderation became characteristic. Unfortunately, there political flexibility led, in Adams' view, to corruption as well as prosperity.

A further obstacle to national unity in 1800 presented itself in the growing importance of the area of the country

west of the Appalachian Mountains. There the problems of sectional self-interest and lack of efficient means of transportation and communication which beset the states of the Atlantic seaboard were compounded. The mountain range itself presented a natural barrier to easy intercourse with the East, and all the navigable rivers of the area flowed into the Mississippi, then south to the Gulf of Mexico. The people of the area had little in common with their fellow citizens to the east. The hardships of life on the frontier had done much to produce a new type of man, in Adams' view, who held eastern culture and intellectual interests in general in contempt, and who was, though hearty, coarse.

In his assessment of the American character in 1800, Henry Adams found little to suggest the growth of nationalism that would be necessary if the country were to attain a desirable degree of unity. He saw Americans as a simple people, hard working and self-reliant, but too conservative in their distrust of higher education, banks, and the federal government. Sectional rivalry and provincialism could be expunged only if barriers to transportation and communication were eliminated. Such barriers could be overcome only with the aid of scientific investigation and technological advances. Even if the people could put aside their anti-intellectual bias sufficiently to appreciate the possibilities of science and technology, there was still the problem of paying for

internal improvements. Only the federal government could afford to spend the millions of dollars such improvements would cost, yet it was prevented from doing so by the conservative attitude of the people and their lawmakers toward states' rights and strict construction of the Constitution.

The most interesting difference Adams found between the American and his European contemporary was that Americans shared a general belief in human equality and perfectability. Adams asserted that Americans were actually morally better than Europeans only insofar as they all had a chance to work and to prosper from their work. It was work which prevented Americans from developing the same degree of viciousness as their European cousins. American society was free from many of the restraints imposed by rigid class distinctions and the burdens of constant war, with its accompanying taxation. As a result, most Americans were self-confident about their chances for fulfilling their own potential and optimistic that their new society would fulfill its. Adams did not hesitate to suggest that their cheerfulness might have been less had they not been ignorant of what was in front of them.

Adams chose to present Thomas Jefferson as a sort of philosophical spokesman for that new element in the American of 1800. His election reflected a general mood of the people, a desire to put their republican ideas into practice. The Federalist political machine was attacked by the incoming

Republicans on the grounds that it propounded loose construction of the Constitution, that it tended to centralize power, that it levied internal taxes, that it advocated a perpetual government debt, and that it maintained a standing army and navy.² The Republicans intended to abandon such practices and substitute in their place policies of states' rights and strict construction which would allow the country's citizens a greater degree of freedom in pursuing their own perfection in their own way. The sixteen years of Jefferson's and Madison's administrations were, in Henry Adams' eyes, a noble experiment that was doomed to fail. Adams had already told the story of that failure in his biographies of Albert Gallatin and John Randolph, but in the History he retold it "more agonizingly, never missing a shred of proof or an opportunity to show how the Jeffersonians ended up behaving like the Federalists."³

In organizing the great mass of material between the two framing sections, Adams used a number of unifying devices. The most significant--significant because it allowed for the creation of a dramatic intensity missing in the Gallatin--was the treatment of the role of personality in history. Thomas Jefferson's thought and character dominate the History;

²Contosta, p. 81.

³Contosta, p. 81.

his actions, and those of Madison as well, "serve as centers and references for a world-wide complication of action and reaction."⁴

His presentation of Jefferson's character and the characters of other men throughout the work was modified by a number of factors other than the completeness or reliability of his sources of information. One of these was the possibility of an inherited bias. In order to compensate for such an influence, Adams submitted his manuscripts to the critical judgments of others, and when he received advice he showed himself ready to follow it. For example, George Bancroft complained that Adams' language was "extremely strong" in referring to Jefferson's behavior as "absolutely cowed" on the occasion of the British invasion of Virginia in the spring of 1781. Adams replied, "I know of nothing . . . that should entitle Mr. Jefferson to more than simple justice--at least from me. As my judgment may, however, be warped, I hesitate."⁵ And he did upon several occasions lessen the sharpness of his criticism. Adams apparently felt a good bit of compassion for Jefferson and intended to treat him with witty satire. He had advised Henry Cabot

⁴Stevenson, p. 231.

⁵25 April 1879, Cater, p. 90.

Lodge that his "abuse" of Jefferson in an article on John Torrey Morse, Jr., written for the North American Review, was "a trifle crude" and lacked "delicacy." He had gone on to say that it was "always safe to abuse Jefferson and much easier than to defend him."⁶ He echoed this idea and expressed his own desire not to chose the easier course several years later when he complained to John Hay that Jefferson "is a character of comedy. John Adams is a droll figure, and good for Sheridan's school; but Thomas Jefferson is a case for Beaumarchais; he needs the lightest of touches, and my hand is as heavy as his own sprightliness."⁷

Henry's brother and frequent critic Charles Francis, Jr., held a greater degree of family bias against Jefferson and Madison than Adams did. His influence led Adams to edit out many positive comments he made about both men to the point that the tone became more harshly critical. A particularly interesting example of his brother's influence has been pointed out by Ernest Samuels in his biography of Henry Adams. In his privately printed edition of the History, Adams had praised Jefferson's 1806 speech advocating the use of the treasury surplus for the public welfare:

In meeting this issue, on which the future character of the Union seemed to depend,

⁶ June 1876, Ford, Letters I, p. 286.

⁷ 3 September 1882, Ford, Letters I, p. 338.

Mr. Jefferson rose to an elevation such as he never elsewhere reached. Through most of his writings, both before and after, it is easy to feel the pulsations of a genial temper, a pure patriotism, a liberal and active mind; but very rarely indeed are those high qualities to be seen except in company with some trace of pure Virginian prejudice or fantastic or half-developed thought which he took for philosophy. The Annual Message of 1806 rose above all these mental limitations, and reached a level such as lifted its author among statesmen of the highest order, whose minds developed with experience, have by natural good sense overcome their own innate prejudice.⁸

Charles Francis, Jr., took the position that Jefferson's behavior showed him "abandoning the correct principle of local government" in order to curry favor and thus proved him to be "devoid of executive ability" and a man of "no real convictions." He called Adams' praise mere "stuff," and Adams deleted the entire passage.⁹ As a result of his brother's criticisms, Adams' portrait of Jefferson lost much of its sympathetic tone and wit.

When the History was published, despite generally favorable critical response, a number of persons complained whose sectional bias or patriotism had been offended, or whose ancestors had not, as they saw it, been fairly treated. The most damning attack appeared in a two-part letter to the

⁸ Samuels II, p. 391.

⁹ Samuels II, p. 391.

editor of the New York Tribune. This piece, entitled "A Case of Hereditary Bias--Some Strictures on the 'History of the United States of America,'" was signed "Housatonic." The author accused Adams of showing favoritism toward his own family:

Within [its] pages are thinly veiled the prejudices and hatreds of the elder Adams and his son [John and John Quincy Adams]. The pages reflect [their] fervid vociferations and rancorous aspersions . . . toned down to suit the taste of the present day, in order the more effectually to damn antagonists and enemies.¹⁰

The anonymous reviewer's own rancor was so obvious as to deflate the charge somewhat, and Adams himself chose not to respond to it. The charge of family bias has remained an open issue, however. Present-day critics continue to argue over Adams' lack of objectivity in the presentation of his-
torical figures, especially Thomas Jefferson.¹¹ However, even

¹⁰ "Housatonic," pseudonym of William Henry Smith, "A Case of Hereditary Bias--Some Strictures on the 'History of the United States of America,'" Pamphlet reprinted from The New York Tribune of Dec. 10 and 15, 1890, 5-6.

¹¹ Richard Beale Davis charged that Adams was unfair to the South in Intellectual Life in Jefferson's Virginia, 1790-1830 (Chapel Hill, N.C.: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1964). Peter Shaw accused Adams of family favoritism in "Blood is Thicker Than Irony: Henry Adams' History" New England Quarterly, 40 (June 1967), 163-87. Merrill Peterson claimed Adams did not treat Jefferson as a whole man, but merely as a political force, in "Henry Adams on Jefferson the President," Virginia Quarterly Review, 39 (Spring 1963), 187-201. Earl N. Harbert defended Adams' efforts to achieve historical objectivity in "Henry Adams' New England View: A Regional Angle of Vision," Tulane Studies in English, 16 (1968), 107-34, and in The Force So Much Closer Home: Henry Adams and the Adams Family.

the most censorious of these, Peter Shaw, could find but "one detectable misrepresentation" in the entire four thousand pages, and that consisted of crediting John Quincy Adams with more reluctance to support the embargo than he apparently felt.¹²

Any charge that Henry Adams falsified or deliberately manipulated his material so as merely to even some ancient score through what has recently been called "an infinitely malicious portrait"¹³ is unjust as it does not take into account the fact that in the mid to late nineteenth century Jefferson's reputation was at a rather low ebb generally and Adams' own intentions to do the man justice were considerably restrained by his brother's editing. Yet Adams was influenced by other considerations than those already mentioned. For one thing, he did indeed hope to write a new kind of history, or at least to prepare a way for the writing of a new kind of history. His interest in the role played by personality in history had quickened following the writing of the Gallatin, but even in the History he was primarily interested in personality as it revealed character, and character as a source of intellectual and political action. He did not wish to present his protagonists as heroes and molders of destiny

¹²Shaw, pp. 182-83.

¹³Otto Friedrich, Clover: A Love Story (New York: Simon-Schuster, 1979), p. 284.

upon whom the events of history waited. Of the only person in the History who came close to being such a figure, Adams said: "The idea that leaders were everything and masses without leaders were nothing, was a military view of society which led Napoleon into all his worst miscalculations."¹⁴ The new history Adams hoped to inspire would be based on "scientific" principles rather than romantic aggrandizement of the individual.¹⁵ So Adams set out to treat his central characters as comic figures rather than tragic heroes. The fact that he did not carry through his intention may have been due to the nature of the material he had to deal with or to a failure of his own skill as a comic writer (as he himself suggested when he complained to John Hay of his own heavy handedness in drawing Jefferson's portrait). Irony and wit his writing had plenty of, but not Beaumarchain sprightliness.

Certain stylistic and organizational considerations also influenced Adams' portrait of Jefferson. In order to maintain his unity through the nine volumes, Adams had to keep

¹⁴Henry Adams, Historical Essays (New York: Scribner's, 1891) p. 175.

¹⁵In his introductory essay to The Education of Henry Adams and Other Selected Writings (New York: Twayne, 1964), Edward N. Saveth places Adams in the context of historical thinking in his generation and assesses him as a transition figure between the literary and the scientific historians. Though printed originally in 1952, William Jordy's Henry Adams: Scientific Historian remains one of the best studies on Adams' low degree of success with incorporating science into his writings.

Jefferson at the center of action. In order to be successful in his ironic style, he had to present Jefferson as an essentially honest man of sound moral character and Jefferson's cause as a worthy one. Had Jefferson been less talented, less sincerely motivated, less nearly great, and had his cause been less worth striving for, there would have been no justification for such a long and detailed analysis of the double failure as the History. But the supporting documentary evidence Adams used in telling his story had the unfortunate effect of making Jefferson look bad long before the story ended. To counteract this tendency, Adams would follow a particularly deflating passage with praise of Jefferson's admirable qualities. Unfortunately, the overall effect of such back-and-forth motion was an exaggerated impression of Adams' negative criticism of Jefferson.¹⁶

Adams' thematic concerns were an additional influence on his portrait of Jefferson. He was interested in the nature and significance of failure, and not just the failure of the Republican cause. The failure of the individual, especially the politically powerful individual, had achieved thematic import in the Gallatin, when Adams judged Albert Gallatin an ultimate failure despite his apparent successes. The pattern set there--of the individual being tried, by forces beyond his control, misunderstood by friends and foes alike, losing power

¹⁶ Jordy, p. 62.

and becoming disillusioned--is repeated in the figures of Jefferson in the History and of Charles Sumner, William Henry Seward and Henry Adams himself in The Education, where failure finally appears to achieve mythic significance.

A second thematic concern that focused on Jefferson, as well as other figures in the History, was Adams' idea that individuals were chiefly important as representative types: "The scientific interest of American history centered in national character, and in the workings of a society destined to become vast, in which individuals were important chiefly as types."¹⁷ Throughout the work, however, though Jefferson and Madison were referred to as the Virginia Presidents and representatives of the Virginia School of statesmen and politicians, they were also shown to be clearly atypical of the very type they supposedly represented. What Jefferson more clearly seemed to typify was "a basic strain in the national character which he represented rather than formed."¹⁸ Along with a goodly portion of the electorate of 1800, Thomas Jefferson shared an attitude of political conservatism, a belief in human equality, a faith in the basic goodness of human nature, and a naive optimism as to their future and that of the country.

It is hardly surprising that such a complex treatment of so complex a subject by an author as complex himself as Henry

¹⁷ History, IX, p. 222.

¹⁸ Levenson, p. 124.

Adams should lead critics into disagreement.

Once done with the six introductory chapters, Adams set about examining the day-to-day events of the Jefferson and Madison administrations for efficiency and consistency of action. He found little. His analysis enlarged the scope of the story he had already, in essence, narrated in the Gallatin: the events, his attitude toward the leading characters, and his conclusions did not change much from their original presentation, but the degree of detail and the minuteness of the analysis, the central focus, and the style did.

Thomas Jefferson had first appeared in the History as the intellectual representative of a certain strain in the American character. He was the American democratic type. As "literary representative of the class [he] spoke chiefly for Virginians, and dreaded so greatly his own reputation as a visionary that he seldom or never uttered his whole thought. . . . The press in no country could give shape to a mental condition so shadowy."¹⁹ Though Adams acknowledged the difficulty of giving voice to this democratic spirit of Americans, he suggested that Jefferson came closest to giving it expression "for he represented the hopes of science as well as the prejudices of Virginia."²⁰ He credited Jefferson with

¹⁹ History, I, p. 176.

²⁰ History, I, p. 178.

inventing the first scientific plough, importing the first threshing machine known in Virginia, and experimenting with a new drilling machine as evidence of his being "the most active-minded and sanguine of all Virginians."²¹

To be both a promoter of the benefits of science and technology and a leader of the Virginia school of political thought was, to Adams' mind, somewhat of a contradiction. The major intention of the Virginia school was to confine government action by narrowing its field. Jefferson and Madison gave it expression and guided its course "but seemed little suited to [do so by their] tastes and instincts."²² Paradoxically, Thomas Jefferson was the intellectual leader of the Virginia school:

According to the admitted standards of greatness, Jefferson was a great man. After all deductions on which his enemies might choose to insist, his character should not be denied elevation, versatility, breadth, insight and delicacy; but neither as politician nor as a political philosopher did he seem at ease in the atmosphere which surrounded him. As a leader of democracy he seemed singularly out of place. As reserved as President Washington in the face of popular familiarities, he never showed himself in crowds. . . . nor indeed was he seen at all except on horseback, or by his friends and visitors in his own house. With manners apparently popular and informal, he led a life of his own, and allowed few persons to share it. His tastes were for that day excessively refined. His instincts were those of a liberal European nobleman . . . he built for himself at Monticello a chateau above contact with man. The rawness of political law was an incessant torture to him and

²¹History, I, p. 32.

²²History, I, p. 143.

personal attacks made him keenly unhappy. His true delight was in an intellectual life of science and art. . . . he fairly revelled in what he believed to be beautiful, and his writings often betrayed subtle feelings for artistic form,--a sure mark of intellectual sensuousness. He shrank from whatever was rough or coarse, and his yearning for sympathy was almost feminine. That such a man should have ventured upon the stormy ocean of politics was surprising, the more because he was no orator, and owed nothing to any magnetic influence of voice or person. Never effective in debate, for seventeen years before his Presidency he had not appeared in a legislative body except in the chair of the Senate. He felt a nervous horror for the contentiousness of such assemblies, and even among his own friends he sometimes abandoned for the moment his strongest convictions rather than support them by an effort of authority.

If Jefferson seemed ill at ease in the position of popular leader, he seemed equally awkward in the intellectual restraints of his own political principles. He shared little in common with the provincialisms on which the Virginia and Kentucky Resolutions were founded. His instincts led him to widen rather than to narrow the bounds of every intellectual exercise; and if vested with political authority, he could no more resist the temptation to stretch his powers than he could abstain from using his mind on any subject merely because he might be drawn upon ground supposed to be dangerous. . . . Prone to innovation, he sometimes generalized without careful analysis. He was a theorist, prepared to risk the fate of mankind on the chance of reasoning far from certain in its details. His temperament was sunny and sanguine. . . . He was curiously vulnerable, for he seldom wrote a page without exposing himself to attack. He was superficial in his knowledge and

martyr to the disease of conscience. Ridicule of his opinions and of himself was an easy task, in which his Federalist opponents delighted, for his English was often confused, his assertions inaccurate, and at times of excitement he was apt to talk with indiscretion. . . .

Jefferson aspired beyond that ambition of a nationality, and embraced in his view the whole future of man. . . . Hoping for a time when the world's ruling interests should cease to be local and should become universal; when questions of boundary and nationality should be insignificant; when armies and navies should be reduced to the work of police, and politics should consist of non-intervention,--he set himself to the task of governing with this golden age in view. Few men have dared to legislate as though eternal peace were at hand, in a world torn by wars and convulsions and drowned in blood; but this was what Jefferson aspired to do. Even in such dangers he believed Americans might safely set an example which the Christian world would be led to respect and at length imitate. As he conceived a true American policy, war was a blunder, an unnecessary risk; and even in case of robbery and aggression the United States, he believed, had only to stand on the defensive in order to obtain justice in the end. He would not consent to build up a new nationality merely to create more navies and armies, to perpetuate the crimes and follies of Europe; the central government of Washington should not be permitted to indulge in the miserable ambitions that had made the old world a hell, and frustrated the hopes of humanity.

With these humanitarian ideas that passed beyond the bounds of nationality, Jefferson held other views which seemed narrower than ordinary provincialism. Cities, manufactures, mines, shipping, and accumulation of capital led, in his opinion, to corruption and tyranny. . . .

This doctrine was not original to Jefferson, but its application to national affairs

on a great scale was something new in the world, and the theory itself clashed with his intellectual instincts, instincts of liberality and innovation.²³

Jefferson, so described early in the first volume of the History, was a man of uncommon intellect and fine personal virtues; but while his virtues made him an admirable individual, his vices--which arose from weakness rather than an evil nature--more decidedly affected his role as a public man. To Adams, he seemed particularly unsuited to the Presidential role because of the contradictions in his character. Yet during the eight years he was President, Jefferson's "personality . . . appeared to be the government, and impressed itself, like that of Bonaparte, although by a different process, on the mind of the nation."²⁴

As he began his study of the expression of Jefferson's character in political action, Adams' first observation was that the man did not look the part he was to play. His was a tall, rangy figure giving the impression of awkwardness. His sandy complexion easily showed the effects of sunburn, the peeling skin having the appearance of eczema. His manner was shy, and he showed his geniality best at home among friends where he would make "rambling and often brilliant conversation."²⁵

²³History, I, pp. 143-48.

²⁴History, I, p. 187.

²⁵History, I, p. 187.

His mode of dress, frequently ridiculed in the Federalist newspapers, was careless and unfashionable. His typical apparel might include a "red waistcoat and yarn stockings, slippers down at heel, and clothes that seemed too small for him."²⁶ With such an appearance, Jefferson might well have seemed a fit subject for burlesque. Adams waggishly suggested that Jefferson's plain clothes at his first inaugural indicated that the new President "seemed to regard his peculiar style of dress as a matter of political importance."²⁷ But humor gave way to irony for in 1804 that was exactly what Jefferson's mode of dress and republican manners became. When Great Britain's new minister, Anthony Merry, made a formal call at the White House, he interpreted Jefferson's appearance and behavior as a deliberate insult. Although the diplomatic repercussions of the incident probably did not affect the outcome of British-American relations, they did affect the tone.

Since Adams' main concern in the History was with action, he moved quickly from a description of Jefferson to a discussion of the ideals revealed in his inaugural speech, and from thence to a consideration of Jefferson's putting his ideals into practice. Although the events of his first administration brought him what seemed to be great successes and what was greater popular favor than perhaps any other president (with

²⁶History, I, p. 187.

²⁷History, I, p. 187.

the possible exception of Theodore Roosevelt) has enjoyed, his ideal system of government "never became fully established."²⁸ Events got in the way. Revealed in Jefferson's responses to those events, Adams saw the reflections of the flaws in Jefferson's character and his system.

The first problem came in the form of a patronage squabble. Upon entering office, Jefferson had indicated there would be few removals from office of those appointed by previous administrations, and those that were made would be only for sufficient cause, such as "delinquency, oppression, intolerance."²⁹ He wrote a friend that he expected there to be no more than twenty at most. But there were considerably more. The doings of the New York Council of Appointment caused the greatest stir. There a battle raged for party control between Aaron Burr and DeWitt Clinton. At issue were offices and party patronage, not principles of reform: "on both sides the game was selfish, and belonged rather to the intrigues of Guelfs and Ghibellines . . . than to the pure atmosphere of Jefferson's republicanism."³⁰ When Jefferson was made aware of what was going on, he was embarrassed, according to Adams, "not so much by patronage as by the apparent inconsistency between his professions and his acts concerning it."³¹ Gallatin did

²⁸History, I, p. 243

²⁹History, I, p. 227.

³⁰History, I, p. 234.

³¹History, I, p. 225.

not care whether Clinton or Burr won, but he did not approve of the use of federal patronage for party intrigues. So he suggested that Jefferson approve a Treasury Circular that would prevent further removals among lower-ranking officers. In refusing to do so until half the officeholders had been removed, Jefferson, according to Adams, "without going so far as to assert that to the victors belonged the spoils, . . . contented himself with claiming that to the victors belong half the spoils."³² When Gallatin informed him that such was already the case, Jefferson yet hesitated, saying it would not be wise to offend friends in order to conciliate moderate Federalists. Adams saw Jefferson's attitude and his lack of action as immediately damaging to his cause and, in the long run, as damaging to the country: "He could not follow his true instincts; for the pressure upon him, although trifling when compared with what he thus helped to bring on his successors, was more than he could bear."³³ With characteristic irony, Adams added that Gallatin was so disgusted with the "scandalous proceedings of the New York Council of Appointment" as to declare that "they disgraced the Republican cause, and sank the Administration itself to a level with its predecessors."³⁴

³² History, I, p. 225.

³³ History, I, p. 235.

³⁴ History, I, p. 236.

The Republican in-fighting over patronage did not shock the people, as Adams surely thought it should have, and thus it decreased neither Jefferson's nor his party's popularity. Only Federalists cried out in protest, but they had already been convinced that "[e]very dissolute intriguer, loose-liver, forger, false-coiner, and prison-bird; every hare-brained, loud-talking demagogue; every speculator, scoffer, and atheist,--was a follower of Jefferson; and Jefferson was himself the incarnation of their theories."³⁵ So they could hardly claim surprise at the confirmation of their theories. Adams suggested that some of the Republicans, however, were themselves shocked at their own behavior. Such men were "honest" and had "supposed themselves to have crushed a corrupt system, and to have overthrown in especial the influence of Executive patronage upon Congress."³⁶ But as they listened to a Federalist from Pennsylvania, Senator James Asheton Bayard, reply in debate to a speech by Senator William Branch Giles of Virginia, they must have felt a moment of uneasiness. Giles, in a long speech in favor of the repeal of the Judiciary Act which established the circuit court system, charged that patronage was a Federalist system. Bayard responded with a list of all the acts of patronage the Republicans had committed in

³⁵History, I, p. 80.

³⁶History, I, p. 284.

less than a year, and, Adams added, "the best men of the party . . . listened to Bayard's catalogue of Executive favors as though it were a criminal indictment. They knew he might have said more if he had been deeper in Executive secrets."³⁷

The patronage squabbles were interesting to Adams primarily because he saw in them a moral failure that preceded the practical failure of the Republican system. Ironically Jefferson suffered personally from the consequence of his action in this as in other situations. Adams asserted that "[h]ad the President followed his duty in the case of Burr, the triumph of DeWitt Clinton and [his political cronies] . . . would have been more difficult than it was; but the President feared Burr the less."³⁸ Thus Jefferson saddled himself with a gang of men whose abilities and morals were less than estimable. Though not motivated by any real desire for reform, this group of men conspired to deprive others within their own party of power and influence. Jefferson not only had to "endure" their "attachment," but he also had "to feel that Madison and Gallatin were sacrificed to his own safety."³⁹

A second difficulty Jefferson encountered in his first administration was his battle with the Supreme Court. If Republican theory were to be successfully put into action,

³⁷History, I, p. 296.

³⁸History, I, p. 199.

³⁹History, I, p. 199.

Adams asserted, Jefferson had to gain control of the Judiciary. The "lame duck" Congress had left the incoming Republicans with a Judiciary Act in 1801 that changed the number of Supreme Court justices from six to five, raised the number of district courts from thirteen to sixteen, and instituted sixteen new circuit courts. The Republicans, especially those of strong states-rights sentiments, resisted the growth of a strong federal court system, and they particularly resented the way the law had been put into action. It had been passed three weeks before John Adams left office. Adams had appointed only members of his own party to the newly created positions. Some of the commissions were not signed until the very night before the out-going President left the White House. So the new Republican Congress repealed the law, though not without long debate, as the law itself was a good one.

The matter was not settled merely by repeal of an act, nor for that matter by the year's hiatus in the Supreme Court's sessions which followed the repeal:

[The] question of how to deal with the Judiciary was . . . the only revolutionary issue before the people to be met or abandoned; and if abandoned then, it must be forever. No party can claim the right to ignore its principles at will, or imagine that theories once dropped could be resumed with equal chances of success. If the revolution of 1800 was to endure it must control the Supreme Court. The object must be reached by constitutional ammendment, by

impeachment or by increasing the number
of judges.⁴⁰

Because his majority in the Senate was still small in 1801-02, Jefferson doubted he could muster the two-thirds vote required for amendment. Because the judges held office for life, there was little chance of replacing them with Republican appointees. As a result of these difficulties Jefferson chose to suggest impeachment, first of John Pickering, Federal District Judge in New Hampshire, and then of Samuel Chase, Associate Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court.

Had the Republicans been successful, there would have been little doubt that their next target would have been Chief Justice Marshall. But they were not successful. Judge Pickering was impeached as unfit and removed from office, but as he was effectually insane his removal hardly qualified as a Republican victory because incompetence did not clearly fall within the constitutional bounds of treason, bribery, or other high crimes and misdemeanors. Justice Chase had bad manners and a bad temper, but he was not insane. When Justice Chase addressed a grand jury at Baltimore on the dangers of the democratic tendencies of their local and national government, Jefferson interpreted his words as sedition that should not go unpunished. The prosecution was handled by John Randolph, of whom Adams said, "a worse champion for a difficult cause

⁴⁰History, I, p. 276.

could not be imagined."⁴¹ And Justice Chase was acquitted by a narrow vote.

The impeachment had been a "dangerous venture" to begin with.⁴² It might not have succeeded under the best of circumstances, but Adams accused Jefferson of doing nothing to encourage its success except writing the initial letters suggesting the action. Adams attributed Jefferson's lack of action to two motives, one admirable, one not. First Jefferson desired to decrease the power of the Executive as part of his Republican System, so he "abnegated power" and "desired harmony."⁴³ Unfortunately, the Congress was so weak by comparison that the task was beyond his power.⁴⁴ The result was described by Adams thusly:

Jefferson might honestly strip himself of patronage, and abandon the receptions of other Presidents; he might ride every day on horseback to the Capitol in "overalls of corduroy, faded by frequent immersions in soapsuds, from yellow to a dull white," and hitch his horse in the shed,--he alone wielded power. . . . In the three former Administrations, the House had been the most powerful part of the body politic, and the House was ill-suited for factious purposes. The Senate was not yet a

⁴¹History, II, p. 151.

⁴²History, II, p. 150.

⁴³History, I, p. 262.

⁴⁴History, I, p. 264.

favorite place for party leaders to fortify themselves in power. . . .⁴⁵

Jefferson's second reason for not pressing the matter of the impeachment was, according to Adams, fear of the loss of popularity: ". . . only political leader as bold as Andrew Jackson would have dared to risk his popularity on such a venture."⁴⁶ To a weak Congress and a hesitating President was added the erratic nature of the prosecutor--a mixture that prevented the Republicans from gaining the control of the Judiciary they wanted and needed. To Adams' mind this situation "did more to define the character of the government than any other single event in Jefferson's first administration except the purchase of Louisiana."⁴⁷

The high point of those first four years was indeed the Louisiana Purchase. In a temporary peace between Britain and France, Napoleon had become interested in expanding his empire in the new world. He had coerced the Spanish into retroceding Louisiana to France. He intended to use the island of Santo Domingo in the Caribbean as a supply base for French activities on the North American continent, but a remarkable successful slave rebellion and debilitating illness among his troops

⁴⁵History, I, p. 266

⁴⁶History, I, p. 262.

⁴⁷History, I, p. 152.

defeated his intentions. In turning his attentions back to Europe, he decided to trade Louisiana for monies to fill his war chest. In the meantime, the French authorities at Santo Domingo had sent the American consul away, insulted American merchants and ship captains, put Americans in prison and confiscated American property. In addition, the Spanish intendant of Louisiana forbade Americans the right to deposit their merchandise at New Orleans. Compelled to act by the threat to American purses more than that to American pride, Jefferson sent James Monroe to France with instructions for the American envoy there to try to buy New Orleans and the Floridas, or New Orleans alone, or some other spot on the east bank of the Mississippi where Americans west of the Appalachians could transship goods. Napoleon offered to sell the entire Louisiana territory. In moving immediately to accept Napoleon's offer, Jefferson acted rightly, according to Adams, but he did not act according to his Republican principles. He felt that his action in adding new territories to the United States could not be justified in the powers granted to the Executive by the Constitution. He hoped that a constitutional amendment could be passed which would legalize the purchase; but when others advised against the necessity for such an amendment, he did not press for one though he said that not to amend the Constitution would make "blank paper" of it. His motive may have been political expediency or a desire not to have a disagreement with friends, but Jefferson's action--or

lack of it--was to Henry Adams an abandonment of the ideas of strict construction, weak government, and the limitation of the powers of the central government by the written Constitution which were at the heart of Republican theory.

The political consequences of the Louisiana Purchase were, as Adams saw them, that

Within three years of his inauguration Jefferson bought a foreign colony without its [the colony's] consent and against its will, annexed it to the United States by an act which he said made blank paper of the Constitution; and then he who had found his predecessors too monarchical, and the Constitution too liberal in powers,--he who had nearly dissolved the bonds of society rather than allow his predecessor to order a dangerous alien out of the country in a time of threatened war,--had made himself monarch of the new territory, and wielded over it, against its protests, the powers of its old kings. Such an experience was final; no century of slow and half-understood experience could be needed to prove that the hopes of humanity lay thenceforward, not in attempting to restrain the government from doing whatever the majority should think necessary, but in raising the people themselves till they should think nothing necessary but what was good.⁴⁸

There was a further event during Jefferson's first administration that acted as a portent of things to come and that was the war with the Barbary pirates. Shortly after Jefferson assumed office, the Barbary powers--Morocco, Algiers, Tunis, and Tripoli--raised the price of safe passage charged foreign

⁴⁸History, II, p. 130.

ships traveling near their coastlines. Their policy was one of blackmail, so when Jefferson refused to pay the new toll, Tripoli declared war and held American citizens hostage. About the time of Jefferson's re-election, a settlement was reached that broke off hostilities. Although the United States successfully resolved its disagreement with the Pasha of Tripoli, the conflict had far-reaching consequences. First, it necessitated the reimposing of taxes to the full amount they had been before the Republicans took office, thus showing that war rendered Republican financial goals impossible. Second, in foreign policy Jefferson's theory was that he could substitute commercial restrictions for armaments, but he found himself "through no fault of his own or of his predecessors, at war,"⁴⁹ which Adams saw as an indication that historical necessity, not political theory, determined the course of events. Third, it was armaments--frigates in this case--and the men who wielded them that made a successful resolution possible. Yet Jefferson and his party had opposed the building of those very ships and were still anxious to put them in dry dock at the Navy Yard. Jefferson's opposition to a strong navy became an important factor in producing the wretched state of unpreparedness in which the United States began the war of 1812. The war with Tripoli, though an apparent success, was "the first failure of President Jefferson's theory of foreign

⁴⁹History, I, p. 243.

relations," but it was not the last.⁵⁰

In 1803, however, Jefferson's position seemed secure. Gallatin's financial success had contributed greatly to Jefferson's popularity, and people were better satisfied than they had been under previous administrations:

The mass of Americans had become democratic in thought as well as act; not even another political revolution could undo what had been done. As a democrat, Jefferson's social success was sweeping and final; but he was more than a democrat,--and in his other character, as a Virginia Republican of the States-rights school he was not equally successful. . . . If Jefferson's favorite phrase was true,--that the Federalist differed from the Republican only in the shade or less of power to be given to the executive,--it was hard to see how any President could be more Federalist than himself.⁵¹

The 1804 election reflected the popular success of Jefferson's first term, but Adams saw both danger and irony in that popularity. The first lay in Jefferson's vanity: "Rarely was a Presidential election better calculated to turn the head of a President, and never was a President elected who felt more keenly the pleasure of his personal triumph."⁵² Adams was not writing Greek tragedy, but neither was he writing comedy. At this point he spoke almost as Ecclesiastes himself might:

⁵⁰History, II, p. 141.

⁵¹History, II, pp. 76-77.

⁵²History, II, p. 201.

Such success might have turned the head of any philosopher that ever sat on a throne. Easily elated, unwilling to forebode trouble, devoid of humor, and unable to see himself in any but the heroic light, President Jefferson basked in the sunshine of popularity and power as though it was no passing warmth such as had led scores of kings into disaster, but shone by virtue of some democratic law which rested on truth that never could change.⁵³

Unable to see how ironically his actions had become Federalist while his ideals remained Republican, Jefferson was led by the flattery of the popular vote to think his theories were proved sound and his system of government successful. And all the time the national debt had grown larger, the navy had been maintained, the national bank preserved, the powers of the federal government extended, and the territory of the country doubled--all "in the teeth of every political profession the Republican party had ever made."⁵⁴ Adams hardly needed his own biting irony to make his point, as the irony of the situation was manifestly evident in the historical facts.

Adams' point was that judged by his own principles, Jefferson had failed; judged by his practical success he had apparently succeeded, but the seeds of his ultimate failure in practical as well as theoretical matters were already sown.

⁵³History, II, pp. 202-3.

⁵⁴History, II, p. 205.

In practice his statesmanship had grown greater than his theory which, Adams asserted, "proved the liberality and elevation of his mind; and if he did this at some cost to his consistency, he did only what all men have done whose minds kept pace with the movement of their times."⁵⁵ But even in praise Adams was ironical, for Jefferson could not see the future, and his lack of knowledge combined with his personal weaknesses led him to see what he wanted to see and hear what he wanted to hear.

This flaw in his character was nowhere more evident than in his foreign policy:

. . . of all Presidents, none used these arbitrary powers [of diplomacy] with more freedom and secrecy than Jefferson. His ideas of Presidential authority in foreign affairs were little short of royal. He loved the sense of power and the freedom from oversight that diplomacy gave, and thought with reason that his knowledge of Europe was greater than that of other Americans, so he should be left to carry out his policy undisturbed.⁵⁶

His policy was to maintain peace through commercial restrictions rather than armaments, but he erred in two ways. First, he thought that American friendship, particularly in the form of American harbors and American shipping, was as important to France, Spain and England as any military matters might be, so he expected their reasonable self-interest to prevail in diplomatic matters with non-belligerents. But it was Adams' judgment that because

⁵⁵History, III, p. 19.

⁵⁶History, II, p. 245.

"he relied for safety upon the soundness of his theory that every foreign country felt a vital interest in American shipping," he put the country "at the mercy of any Power which might choose to rob it."⁵⁷ Secondly, he attempted to play these powers off against one another by threatening war and alliance with one or the other when all the time he intended to keep the peace no matter what. His intentions not to fight were better known to his enemies than to his friends; by not making his intentions clear to the people at home he "laid trouble down for himself in the future embargo act . . . [where his deceptive manner] caused them to adopt a system which they did not wholly understand, and were not fully prepared to carry out."⁵⁸

As Jefferson began his second term in office, events in Europe began to affect Americans on a number of fronts. Jefferson did not deal with these events either efficiently or successfully, according to Adams:

To impose on hostile forces and interests the compulsion of a single will was the task and triumph of the true politician, which had been accomplished, under difficult conditions, by men of opposite characters. A political leader might be combative and despotic, or pliant and conciliatory. The method mattered little, provided it obtained success, but the success depended more on character than on manoeuvres. In the winter of 1805-

⁵⁷History, I, p. 243.

⁵⁸History, I, p. 273.

1806 President Jefferson dealt with a problem such as few Americans have been required to solve. Other Presidents have met with violent opposition within and without the ranks of their party; but no other President has been obliged to face a hostile minority, together with violent factiousness in the majority, and at the same time a spirit of aggression showing itself in acts of war from three of the greatest Powers of Europe. By what resources of skill or character President Jefferson was to restrain this disorder from becoming chaos, only a prophet could fortell. . . . Some energetic impulse could alone save the country from drifting into faction at home and violence abroad.⁵⁹

That "energetic impulse" did not come from Jefferson, nor from the Congress--which never rose to the level of Jefferson's hopes, nor from James Madison, who "showed the habit of avoiding the heart of every issue, in order to fret its extremities" and who suffered from the "strange delusion . . . that a man like Napoleon could be forced by a mere pin-prick to do Jefferson's will."⁶⁰

As war in Europe was renewed, neither France nor Britain respected the rights of neutrals. They seized American ships, impounded cargoes, harassed trade and commerce, and, in the case of the British, impressed seamen. Such an untenable situation was created that many men in government and out

⁵⁹History, III, pp. 123-24.

⁶⁰History, III, pp. 74-75.

called for a declaration of war--though they disagreed on whom they should fight. Jefferson appeared to be willing to engage either side as he threatened first the French, then the British, but he had, according to Adams, no intention but to maintain peace:

All this formality of belligerent language was little better than comedy. Jefferson could hardly be charged with a wish to deceive, since he could not wear the mask of deception. . . . [He was so transparent] he played a game of finesse hardly safe in the face of men like Godoy, Talleyrand, and Napoleon, whose finesse was chiefly used to cover force, and was not betrayed or derided by factious opposition in the press. Besides being unsafe, it was unfair to himself. Jefferson was an honest man, and in putting on the outward appearance of a Talleyrand, he resembled an amateur imitating Talma and Garrick. Gestures and tones alike were unnatural, awkward and false; they exposed him to ridicule. If President Jefferson had taken the public into his confidence, he would have told the people that under no circumstances would he consent to war; but that if the great Powers of Europe combined to injure America, she would close her ports, abandon her commerce, shut herself within her own continent, and let the world outside murder and rob elsewhere. Such an avowal implied no disgrace; the policy it proclaimed was the alternative to war; and as the radical doctrine of the Republican party, the course was not only that which Jefferson meant to take, but it was that which he took. The avowal might have invited aggression, and have been followed by failure; but he would have done better to fail on a direct issue of principle,

then to fail after evading the issue
until the issue itself was lost.⁶¹

Jefferson had begun his second term with great self-confidence, but his earlier triumphs were chiefly due to the financial success of his administration: "Gallatin redeemed the mistakes of his party" and "never failed to cover every weak spot in the Administration," according to Adams.⁶² In October, 1807, the treasury was prosperous, but on December 22, 1807, the Congress passed the Embargo Act which closed American ports to foreign ships and prohibited American ships from carrying goods to Europe. This was Jefferson's policy, the true test of his theory of foreign relations. And, Adams granted, it might even have worked if the British had been dependent on American produce, but that summer Britain had had bumper crops and South American ports, previously closed to British trade, opened. An act which Jefferson expected to bring Britain into line with American interests caused suffering in America instead. Where other issues had not affected Jefferson's popularity, this one did: "The American people pardoned everything except an empty Treasury."⁶³ Soon, not only their treasury but their pockets as well were empty.

Adams found particular fault with Jefferson on the embargo

⁶¹History, III, p. 113.

⁶²History, IV, p. 148.

⁶³History, IV, p. 149.

question. He saw it as a manifestation of Jefferson's character and of the Republican system. Thus its failure was a failure of character, theory, and practice:

So confident was Jefferson in his theory of peaceable coercion that he would hardly have thought his administrative career complete, had he quitted office without being allowed to prove the value of his plan. The fascination which it exercised over his mind was quite as much due to temperament as logic; for if reason told him that Europe could be starved into concession, temperament added another motive still more alluring. If Europe persisted in her conduct America would still be safe, and all the happier for cutting off connection with countries where violence and profligacy ruled supreme. The idea of ceasing intercourse with obnoxious nations reflected his own personality in the mirror of statemanship.⁶⁴

With biting satire, Adams commented that "Few rulers ever succeeded in running from danger with dignity," but Jefferson not only thought he could, he thought he could do so "without the appearance of flight."⁶⁵

Not only were Jefferson's means deplorable, but in the end he was not successful. He forced a permanent embargo on the country without making his true motives known:

On his mere recommendation, without warning, discussion, or publicity, and in silence as to his true reasons and motives, he succeeded in fixing upon the country, beyond recall the

⁶⁴ History, IV, p. 168.

⁶⁵ History, IV, p. 139.

experiment of peaceable coercion. His triumph was almost a marvel; but no one could fail to see its risks. A free people require to know in advance the motives which activate government. . . . If Jefferson's permanent embargo should fail to coerce Europe, what would the people of America think of the process by which it had been fastened upon them?⁶⁶

The embargo was an experiment worth making. Had it succeeded, the political and social evils that accompany war would have been avoided. To keep America free from the corruptions of Europe was, Adams acknowledged, "a proper motive for statesmanship and justified a disregard for smaller interests."⁶⁷ Jefferson, Adams claimed, knew the importance of his experiment in moral terms. He knew that his use of power was monarchical, yet he felt that a higher public good required the sacrifice of certain personal rights, just as it had in the instance of the Louisiana Purchase. But the embargo failed.

Nine months of embargo were, in Adams' evaluation, as expensive as war would have been, and in some respects embargo was even more destructive in its effects on the economy, the Constitution and the morals of the nation. Its cost to the Republicans was near ruin politically. Jefferson's popularity was destroyed, and "the labored fabric of his reputation fell

⁶⁶ History, IV, p. 176.

⁶⁷ History, IV, p. 277.

in sudden and general ruin."⁶⁸

Adams strongly criticized Jefferson's behavior in the last days of his administration when "his dignity and duty required him to stand by the government, and to take the responsibility that belonged [to him]."⁶⁹ Instead, he offered no plan, engaged in no activity. He postponed all action till the new President should take over. He frankly admitted that he desired nothing so much as escape. Adams demanded "heroic action," which he knew would have been pointless, but he wanted it anyway.⁷⁰ Perhaps it was old fashioned, romantic heroism Adams had desired from Jefferson all along and disappointment in part that led to his biting satire.

Though Jefferson was often portrayed as ridiculous in his blind adherence to his theory and undignified in his amateurish diplomacy, he had ceased to be a comic figure for Adams long before his fall from popular favor:

Disaster upon disaster, mortification upon mortification, crowded fast upon the man whose triumphs had been so brilliant, but whose last hope was to escape a public censure more humiliating than any yet inflicted on a President of the United States. The interest attached to the history of his administration--an interest at all times singularly personal--centered at last upon the single point of his personality, all

⁶⁸ History, IV, p. 289.

⁶⁹ History, IV, p. 353.

⁷⁰ History, IV, p. 353.

eyes fixing themselves upon the desperate malice with which his ancient enemies strove to drive him from his cover, and the painful efforts with which he still sought to escape their fangs.⁷¹

The sympathetic tone of Adams' treatment of Jefferson increased considerably toward the end of the fourth volume of the History. But the sympathy was of a personal sort which treated Jefferson as a sensitive, well-intentioned gentleman, suffering the venomous attacks of political enemies and the disappointment of a failed ideal:

[He] had hoped to make his country forever pure and free; to abolish war with its train of debt, extravagance, corruption, and tyranny; to build up a government devoted only to useful and moral objects; to bring upon earth a new era of peace and good-will among men. Throughout the twistings and windings of his course as President he clung to this main idea; or if he seemed for a moment to forget it, he never failed to return and to persist with almost heroic obstinacy in enforcing its lessons. By repealing the embargo, Congress avowedly and even maliciously rejected and trampled upon the only part of Jefferson's statesmanship which claimed originality, or which in his own opinion entitled him to rank as a philosophic legislator. The mortification he felt was natural and extreme, but such as every great statesman might expect, and such as most of them experienced. The supreme bitterness of the moment lay rather in the sudden loss of respect and consideration which at all times marked the decline of power, but became most painful when the surrender of office followed a political defeat at the hands of supposed friends.⁷²

⁷¹History, IV, pp. 359-60.

⁷²History, IV, pp. 464-65.

As to the political effects of Jefferson's eight years in office, Adams' judgment did not alter. He said that though Jefferson alone was not the cause of the administration's failure, with one exception (Buchanan?) the country was left in worse shape at the end of his administration than it had ever been before or since.

Once Jefferson left office, Adams turned his attention to the eight years of James Madison's administrations, but he clearly did not find Madison as interesting a character, and as the narrative focus shifted from political and diplomatic to military history, remarkably little attention was given to Madison himself. As a person and a politician, Madison had some admirable qualities, but to Adams' mind he represented nothing new politically--just more, or rather less, of the same old thing.

In treating the final stages of Jefferson's presidency, Adams had dropped the mock-heroic tone and much of the satire of his earlier analysis as the irony of Jefferson's situation had become overwhelming. But with Madison's inaugural, the humor and satire returned. Beginning, as he had with Jefferson, with an analysis of the Inaugural Address, Adams complained that Madison spoke in so low a voice he could not be heard and so his clothing, described as "a full suit of cloth of American manufacture," told as much about his "tendencies" as his speech.⁷³

⁷³History, V, p. 1.

Considering that the "conventionality of his thought nowhere betrayed itself more plainly than in this speech on the greatest occasion of [his] . . . life," Adams suggested that perhaps Madison did not wish to be understood.⁷⁴ In truth, Madison had no new policy; he seemed content to follow the same policies pursued by the earlier administration.

Madison had come to the office because of Jefferson's strong personal attachment and his own success in negotiating the Louisiana Purchase. Although he was a Virginian, he did not control the party there, or elsewhere. His chief support was from northern democrats who felt he was the lesser evil, being the "least Virginian" of all the prominent Virginians.⁷⁵ He was a small man, modest and retiring in manner, cautious to the point of appearing timid; but he had a "quiet malice" in his humor and a "marked taste for closet politics and delicate management" that led Adams to compare him to a cardinal and to acknowledge him a dangerous enemy.⁷⁶ He was intelligent and patriotic, if not visionary and energetic, but he made a very poor president:

Whatever might be Madison's genius, no one supposed it to be that of administration. His health was delicate; he looked worn and feeble; for many years

⁷⁴History, V, pp. 1-2.

⁷⁵History, III, p. 116.

⁷⁶History, III, p. 116.

he had shown none of the energy of
youth ⁷⁷

The problem was that Madison would not or could not lead. He would have willingly followed the lead of the Congress had one been offered there. As it was, he was indecisive and vacillated between one course of action and another. This weakness grew out of his virtue of always being able to see both sides of a question, but it irritated friends as well as enemies. His timidity in dealing with Congress led him to make grave errors in handling patronage. Some of the worst appointments he made were to his own cabinet: "From the outset Madison's Cabinet was the least satisfactory that any President had known. . . . [It had] hardly strength to support two sides of a dispute."⁷⁸

One particularly disastrous appointment was that of Robert Smith as Secretary of State. He and his brother, a senator, were the source of much of Madison's trouble within his own party. Gallatin was the only outstanding man in the Executive, but the senatorial faction that backed Robert Smith placed itself in opposition to Gallatin, whose effectiveness was considerably restricted thereby. Smith was, in Adams' opinion, probably the most incompetent man ever given high office, but the Secretary of War, a former surgeon, and the Secretary of

⁷⁷ History, VI, p. 206.

⁷⁸ History, V, p. 9.

Navy, a former state governor, were not much better. It was Adams' position that a President's responsibility did not end once he issued an order--he was responsible for his agents as well. It is not surprising, therefore, that he chose to repeat Robert Smith's defense to the charge of incompetence. Angry when Madison finally replaced him with James Monroe, Smith retaliated that as it was Madison who knowingly chose him--an incompetent--for the office and offered him the Treasury and the position of minister to Russia as well, Madison himself was unfit for his office.⁷⁹ Adams would seem to have agreed.

The thing that Adams saw as central in Madison's failure was that he "had remained so passive before domestic faction, while so active in foreign affairs that the functions of government promised to end in confusion."⁸⁰ He showed no vigor in dealing with problems at home--though disaffection in New England might well have led to disunion, and he acted without authority in dealing with problems abroad--though he acted with what he thought were the best interests of the country at heart. He followed the same policy of peaceable coercion as his predecessor, with just as little success, when he should have been tending to the incompetence of his

⁷⁹ History, V, p. 379

⁸⁰ History, V, p. 359.

own appointees. The ineptitude of these men and the corruption that accompanied it became Adams' primary target:

A less competent administrative system seldom drifted, by reason of its incompetence, into war with a supreme enemy. No department of the government was fit for its necessary work.⁸¹

The Department of State was helpless to do anything about European offences; the military and naval departments were in much worse shape than their secretaries knew or could understand; the treasury was nearly empty; the Congress was exhausted without having done anything. Such incompetence conspired to bring the government "to the last stage of imbecility before dissolution."⁸²

Where the main events of Jefferson's administrations had been treated with more irony than satire, those of Madison's received the sharpest edge of Adams' satiric knife. Of course he did not abandon his characteristic use of mocking understatement, as in his observation that "Madison's knowledge of the Napoleonic idiom was certainly incomplete."⁸³ But more typically he would describe Madison as voicing "political formulas as conventional as a Chinese compliment [which] probably had value since they were current in every government known

⁸¹History, V, p. 163.

⁸²History, V, p. 358.

⁸³History, V, p. 388.

to man."⁸⁴ Or he might speak thus, "so far from grasping at weapons, Congress and the Executive seemed bent only on throwing away the weapons they held."⁸⁵ Or he might observe of Monroe that he gained the Presidency not through popularity nor force, but "due to the sudden peace which left him the residuum of Madison's many Cabinets."⁸⁶

The main event of Madison's second administration was, of course, the war. According to Adams, the country actually drifted into that war through a series of mistakes. America would have had better reason to have gone to war at any number of earlier dates, would have been better able to support a war effort, and would have found Britain a more willing combatant. But by 1812, Britain wanted peace and was willing to make concessions. Yet twenty-four hours after she repealed the Orders in Council that had been America's greatest cause for grievance, the United States declared war. Once at war the country did not seem to take the situation seriously: no support money could be raised, few volunteered to fight, and state militias refused to serve outside their own states or for enlistment periods of longer than six months. The incapacity of military leaders soon became as apparent as that of the country's political leaders. As defeat after defeat followed in land battles, it

⁸⁵ History, V, p. 356.

⁸⁶ History, IX, p. 123.

was American ships, American seamanship, and Albert Gallatin's diplomatic skills that saved the country from disaster:

In the beginning of Madison's second term, no man of intelligence denied that the war had failed; that its avowed objects could not be gained; that every month of war increased the danger of disunion, brought national bankruptcy nearer, and fastened habits of corruption upon the country.⁸⁷

Gallatin had appeared throughout the History as "the clearest head and most patient temper of his time."⁸⁸ He had given unstintingly of himself, and his was a quite superior self. In return, he had received ingratitude and even abuse. Unlike Jefferson, whom Adams had depicted as abandoning his responsibility once he perceived his own failure, Gallatin--serving once more as the ideal standard by which other politicians and statesman were to be measured--fulfilled his duty: "from the moment ambition ceased abstract ideas of duty alone remained to counteract the disgust of disappointments."⁸⁹ In accordance with that duty, he set out on what appeared to be an impossible task, but he succeeded at it. Gallatin's success as a negotiator at Ghent was attributable to high character and extraordinary ability, but success was possible to him there where it had not been at home because, claimed

⁸⁷History, VII, p. 40.

⁸⁸History, V, p. 364.

⁸⁹History, VI, p. 40.

Adams, "in diplomacy as in generalship, the individual commanded success."⁹⁰ Such, Adams contended, was no longer the case in American politics.

A final irony in the narrative section of the History was Adams' description of James Madison at the end of his eight years in office, basking in the light of the country's new prosperity. "Few Presidents," he said, "ever quitted office under circumstances so agreeable."⁹¹ The dramatic contrast that echoed back two thousand pages to Jefferson's leave taking--travelling alone on horseback through winter storms, burdened with the failure of his statesmanship, to the haven of Monticello--was one of the most affecting ironies Adams ever created.

In the final chapter Adams returned to the framing device he had begun with and he apparently laid all ironies aside as he renewed his discussion of the American character. By 1817, he said, the problems which had faced the country in 1800 had been solved, and the national character had been formed. It is a compelling irony implied by his later works, however, that the anti-intellectualism Adams had seen in the American character in 1800 became, in his view, a significant force leading to the abandonment of idealism and the embracing of

⁹⁰History, IX, p. 14.

⁹¹History, IX, p. 142.

materialism. The pursuit of materialism led, in turn, to the adoption of science and technology to practical ends but not to the understanding of science. Materialistic success was not accompanied by a corresponding degree of intellectual development, and by 1900 Adams had reason to fear that the "engines" man invented were "beyond his strength to control."⁹² But that theme was hardly touched on in the History. Instead Adams emphasized that his chief interest in Jefferson and Madison had not been as individuals, not as heroes, but as types. They represented in the course of the narrative the evolution of the Virginia type into a national democratic type that had as its chief traits (1) an antipathy to war, (2) a resistance to government based on a military system, (3) an inability to develop greatness in national administration, (4) intelligence, (5) inventiveness, (6) mildness, (7) a tendency to relax the strictures of religious orthodoxy, and (8) optimism.⁹³

Jefferson and Madison were not seen as having created or determined these traits of American character so much as they reflected them. The law of the science of history that he thought he saw illustrated by them, especially by Madison, was the explanation for Gallatin's failure. In Adams' opinion, Gallatin should have followed Madison as President, but in

⁹²"To Charles Francis Adams, Jr.," 11 April 1862, Ford, Cycle I, p. 135.

⁹³History, IX, pp. 225-42.

American politics the average, not the truly superior man usually succeeded:

The people in truth, however jealous of power, would have liked in imagination, though they could not bear in practice to be represented by something nobler, wiser, and purer than their own average honor, wisdom, and purity. They could not make an ideal of weakness, ignorance, or vice, even their own ⁹⁴

Thus many of Madison's troubles with his government arose from causes that "were inherent in American society."⁹⁵

Complaining to a friend that it had been extremely difficult to do justice to Jefferson and Madison in the History, Adams wrote:

For they appear like mere grasshoppers kicking and gesticulating on the middle of the Mississippi There is no possibility of reconciling their theories with their acts, or their extraordinary foreign policy with dignity. They were carried along on a stream which floated them, after a fashion, without much regard for themselves.⁹⁶

His difficulties were compounded not only by their behavior, but by his own decision to treat their characters to intellectual analysis so they could carry the burden of his symbolism, but not to treat them as whole men in the biographer's sense.

⁹⁴History, IX, p. 135.

⁹⁵History, V, p. 163.

⁹⁶"To Samuel J. Tilden," 24 January 1883, Cater, p. 126.

The lesson of his political education that the History seemed to have taught Henry Adams was that "the element of individuality is the free-will dogma of science."⁹⁷ That is, Madison and Jefferson were doomed to fail by the forces that moved history--forces beyond the control of their individual influence. Yet if that lesson was truly learned, one must ask why he was so harshly judgmental of their personality foibles. Paradoxically, Adams seemed to say that individual action was meaningless at the same time it was meaningful. In other words, to have behaved according to the ideal standard represented by Albert Gallatin would not have garnered either man any greater worldly success nor happiness than he did attain; yet Adams clearly considered them to have failed in more than one way and for more than one reason. They, like Gallatin, failed to change the world to match their ideals, and they all three failed to maintain the political power they once wielded. Unlike Gallatin, however, Madison and Jefferson failed not only because their system was wrong for the world in which they lived, but because of weaknesses in their characters that they never dealt with sufficiently, and thus by some standard of secular morality and personal dignity they failed again.

⁹⁷ Cater, 126.

CHAPTER IV

THE UNEXPECTED HERO: ABRAHAM LINCOLN

In the History, Adams said that he saw a political age ending with Jefferson's administration. Before 1800, political leaders had guided public opinion but had been little influenced by it. Afterwards, politicians followed the lead of the people and were little if any better in their morals, abilities, or intelligence than the people who elected them. This change had been the result of the democratic leveling that accompanied the growth of republicanism, which Thomas Jefferson initially represented but which Andrew Jackson came to represent in a considerably coarsened form. By 1817, Jefferson's political theory had shown itself to be even more impracticable than that of Hamilton which preceded it. As no other political theory was offered in their place, Adams proclaimed the political age to be at an end.

Exactly where Jefferson himself fit into the process was not made altogether clear. Adams criticized him for having let the weaknesses of his personality and his theory carry the country to the brink of disunion. Then he qualified his criticism by saying that Jefferson was not wholly responsible as there were forces at work both within and without the country over which Jefferson had no control. Although Adams judged the morality and effectiveness of Jefferson's actions

against an ideal standard of individual behavior and found them lacking, he went on to say that the chief lesson of the History was that the inhuman forces of circumstance were stronger than either political dogma or individual will, even under the most advantageous conditions such as occurred during Jefferson's administrations. Only men who could perceive those forces and work with them could actually use their will to affect the course of historical events. Otherwise the individual was meaningless as a historical force. Jefferson was occasionally in tune with those forces, especially early in his presidency, but not so much as the shaper of them. He appeared to be, in Adams' judgment, the shaped.

The economic age Adams saw as replacing the political age did not actually come into existence until after the Civil War. The absence of any reference to it in Adams' writings of the 1860s could easily be explained by the supposition that he had not perceived the condition himself at that time. Yet the recapitulation of that period in The Education did not reveal the seasoned author's perception of economic forces at work either. It was the next decade--the 1870s--which in retrospect took on the appearance of an economic age. The years of the war between the states remained to the final assessment a political age and an indication that Adams' own theory regarding the place of the individual in history was too narrow to satisfy its creator.

The place held by Abraham Lincoln in Henry Adams' political education was an important one. Lincoln's election had been the beginning of Adams' practical education in party politics; Lincoln's success taught Adams the fallibility of his own judgment. Although Adams' remarks about Lincoln are relatively brief, they hold a unique place in his writings about American presidents. Lincoln was the first president the young Adams voted for, the first president he took an active political interest in, the first president he kept a more or less contemporary record of. That record was primarily made in the form of letters, and it reflected rather unabashedly the emotional fervor of the young student of politics and the limitations of his writing skills. Through the middle years of his life, Adams as historian did not turn his attention toward Lincoln, though he claimed that Lincoln and Jefferson were the only two major subjects worth study in American history of the nineteenth century. As an old man in the last major work of his life, Adams returned to Lincoln briefly in The Education. There his comments reflected not only the mature skill of the writer, but a thematic movement of Lincoln the man toward metaphor and symbol.

The starting point of that movement was the election of 1860. That year, while Adams was still in Europe, his family had moved away from its support of the increasingly radical Charles Sumner toward William H. Seward, former governor of

New York, leader of his party in the Senate, and the Republican favorite. When Abraham Lincoln won the party's nomination rather than Seward, the Adamses were disappointed; but they were alarmed at Sumner's growing obstinacy, so when Seward lent his support to the Lincoln candidacy and visited the Adamses in Quincy to urge them to do the same, Charles Francis and his eldest son Charles Francis, Jr., agreed to accompany Seward on a campaign tour throughout what was then the Northwest. Henry Adams kept in close communication with his family, especially his brother during that political summer, and when he returned home that fall he voted for the first time. Just twenty-two, Adams was not at a stage of life where he was likely to disagree on political matters with his family, so he cast his vote for Abraham Lincoln.

Within three weeks he was in Washington as private secretary to his father, who had just been re-elected to Congress, and as eager observer of the uproar of the "lame duck" session of Congress. As an aspiring journalist he had gotten a position as secret correspondent for the Boston Advertiser, a Republican paper, from whence he hoped to dispense information and advice. He also intended, he wrote his brother Charles Francis, Jr., to make a more permanent record of his experiences:

I propose to write you this winter a series of private letters to show how things look. I fairly confess that I want to have a record of this winter on file, and though

I have no ambition or hope to become a Horace Walpole, I still would like to think that a century or two hence when everything else about it is forgotten, my letters might still be read and quoted as a memorial of manners and habits at the time of the great secession of 1860.¹

One of the lighter ironies of his own life must be that his skill as a letter writer has indeed led him to be favorably compared to Walpole, though the events of that winter have not more than a century later been forgotten.

Initially Adams' letters home to the Advertiser and to his brother spoke confidently of the President-elect, though Lincoln was out of sight in Illinois. Adams complained of the "state of anarchy" the country was in because of President Buchanan's weakness, repeated a joke that he had heard regarding the stock market's rise in response to a report that Buchanan had gone insane, and offered his brother the comfort that might be gotten from General Scott's assurance that, in contrast, "Lincoln is a man of power."² He did think he saw Lincoln's hand at work:

Lincoln is all right. You can rely on that. He has exercised a strong influence through several sources on this committee and always right, but as yet there is no lisp of a Cabinet. Not even

¹ 9 December 1860, Ford, Letters I, p. 62.

² 22 December 1860, Ford, Letters I, p. 72.

Seward had been consulted a week ago.³

What Adams eventually discovered was that most of his "sources" had been working on their own authority and William Seward was one such in particular. This knowledge and other events led Adams to doubt Seward's influence with the incoming President. And with that doubt came other doubts.

By the new year, Lincoln had begun making cabinet appointments, and Adams wrote his brother of various efforts of Seward to influence those decisions. On the second of January, he was confident of Seward's "arranging everything with Lincoln through Thurlow Weed."⁴ But by January 18, 1861, the difficulties had become apparent:

Lincoln has offered Cameron the Treasury without Seward's knowledge. Seward was utterly taken aback and would have preferred any other man. He sent Thurlow Weed on to Springfield to urge C.F.A. for the Treasury, but the New England man selected was Welles and Lincoln seems jealous of C.F.A. as too Sewardish. He wants someone to balance Seward's influence. Meanwhile Cameron's appointment has raised a tremendous storm round Lincoln.⁵

³"To Charles Francis Adams, Jr.," 9 December 1860, Ford, Letters I, p. 66. The committee referred to was one set up by the House to deal with the conflict between unionists and disunionists. Charles Francis Adams played an important role therein as the voice of the moderate Republicans.

⁴Ford, Letters I, p. 75.

⁵"To Charles Francis Adams, Jr.," 11 January 1861, Ford, Letters I, p. 83.

The complaint against Cameron, that he "jobbed," resulted in his not getting the position, but he did get the War Office, as Adams thought he might, and Charles Francis Adams, who according to rumor might have been offered the Treasury, became Minister of Great Britain. Writing Charles Francis, Jr., again a bit later in January, Adams reported a loss of power among the moderate Republican element in Pennsylvania. He attributed the loss to Cameron's "revenge" for having been "kicked out" of the Treasury, and in his first negative comment about Lincoln he said, "Lincoln's position is not known, but his course up to this time has shown his utter ignorance of the right way to act, so far as his appointments go. It is said, too, here, that he is not a strong man. I'm afraid they'll manage to compromise us, . . . I don't care much what they do, except that it splits the party."⁶ So much for General Scott's appraisal! By the middle of February a note of pessimism characteristic of Henry Adams' writings throughout his life became evident in his judgment that the next administration would give them all "trouble enough."⁷

More or less satisfied with his journalistic endeavors for the Boston Advertiser, which ended in February because his editor took on the job himself, Adams decided to write an

⁶ 24 January 1861, Ford, Letters I, p. 83.

⁷ "To Charles Francis Adams, Jr.," 13 February 1861, Ford, Letters I, p. 88.

article for the Atlantic Monthly that would restate his views on the events of recent months in Washington. The result, "The Great Secession Winter of 1860-61," he sent to his brother Charles Francis, Jr., in Boston, claiming it was not, after all, worth printing--and it was not published for fifty years. Most of the article was taken up with an account of the ins-and-outs of the House committee on which Charles Francis Adams struggled. But there was also some effective description of the tumult of those days when "Persons whose business led them to keep late hours were alarmed by meeting bodies of men drilling at midnight in the environs of the city" and when "clerks in Government Departments mounted the disunion badge and talked openly of oaths they'd taken never to permit the inauguration of Abraham Lincoln."⁸ In summarizing the role played by Lincoln, of whom he had had hopeful expectations and with whom he had become somewhat disillusioned--all on the basis of hearsay evidence, he said:

. . . the party hesitated and turned for the decisive word to the final authority at Springfield. The word did not come. In its stead came doubtful rumors tending to distract public opinion still more. . . . it became more and more evident that there was no concerted action between the President-elect and the Republicans at Washington, and that Mr. Seward had acted all winter on his own responsibility.⁹

⁸Adams, "The Great Secession Winter of 1860-61," p. 7.

⁹Adams, "The Great Secession Winter of 1860-61," p. 25.

Party discipline fell apart as a result, and when Lincoln arrived in the capital, it was evident that the Republicans could act in unity on no issue except anti-slavery. Adams did modify his charge against Lincoln for not taking a controlling hand in unifying the party to this extent:

Under these circumstances the task of Mr. Lincoln was one which might well have filled with alarm the greatest statesman that ever lived. He had to deal with men and measures that would have taxed the patience of Washington and required the genius of Napoleon. It was therefore not to be expected, nor indeed wished, that on his arrival he would instantly throw himself into the arms of either set of his friends before judging for himself the merits of the case; nor was it possible that all the dangers and pressing necessities of the time should be wholly apparent to him.¹⁰

In March, Adams attended the Inaugural Ball where, for the first and last time, he actually saw Lincoln. He described the affair as dull and the man as homely. On the nineteenth, word arrived of his father's appointment, and from then on for a good long while Adams continued to base his judgment of Lincoln on the opinions of his family and of Seward, all of whom underrated the President's intelligence. When Charles Francis Adams returned from his interview with Lincoln prior to leaving for England and his new duties, his account of the incident confirmed the family's fear of Lincoln's lack of presidential ability. Lincoln had listened in silence,

¹⁰ Adams, "The Great Secession Winter of 1860-61," p. 26.

apparently lost in thought about other matters, when Adams thanked him for the appointment. He responded by telling Adams that he should thank Seward instead as he, Adams, had not been Lincoln's choice. Then instead of discussing foreign policy as Adams expected him to, he chatted with Seward about the Chicago post office appointment. Adams seemed as much grieved by Lincoln's deportment during the meeting (he stretched his legs out in front of himself and swung his arms over his head) as by his words. Years later in Adams' biography it was said that the impression made then was not changed to any great extent by later events.¹¹ Clearly, the family thought that he had been intentionally insulted in the interview.

Once in England, Henry Adams' comments on Lincoln were pretty much based on his foreign policy as filtered through and in great part dictated by Seward, on sensational and often fallacious newspaper reports, and on the letters of his brother Charles Francis, Jr. The first incident to arouse his ire occurred soon after the family arrived in London. Earlier, in April, Seward had sent the new President a memorandum which he titled "Some Thoughts for the President's Consideration," outlining a policy toward England and France that was practically an incitement to war. Perhaps he felt

¹¹ Samuels, I, pp. 95-96.

the threat of foreign war would bring the secessionists into line and strengthen the Union; perhaps the document was little more than part of a power play in the cabinet. Whichever, Lincoln did not act on it. But Seward perserved, following up his memorandum with a dispatch which demanded that Queen Victoria's government adopt the Northern position that the secessionist movement in the South was a rebellion. Lincoln insisted that the tone of the dispatch be modified and that Minister Adams use it for his own guidance but not deliver it formally to the Queen's minister, Earl John Russell. The news of the insulting tone of the dispatch leaked to the British press (apparently not through either Adams), but when, in response to fear of a Northern take-over of Canada, the government sent military reinforcements, Henry Adams did write--in his role as anonymous London correspondent for the New York Times--of "rumors current that the President and his Cabinet wanted to bring about a foreign war."¹² He was attempting to warn people at home to guard against such a move at the same time he warned Lincoln and Seward that such dangerous political ploys would not remain hidden from the American public.¹³ By July 2, 1861, Adams was able to write his brother that "Seward's tone has improved very much since that crazy

¹²Samuels I, p. 105.

¹³Samuels I, p. 105.

dispatch that frightened me so."¹⁴ A great deal of damage had been done, however, by the creation of British public distrust toward Seward and Lincoln.

In the early fall, writing once again to his brother, he was filled with a sense of wrathful patriotism and chastised him for "complaining and faultfinding over the course of events," saying he was not "backing" his friends, and warning him that such behavior as "Croaking is just as likely to bring another defeat as that ridiculous bravado which sent our army to Bull Run." He accused his brother of using the President and the Cabinet as "scapegoats," "faultfinding . . . simply because their positions prevent them from showing [him] . . . the truth." And again, he said, "You go on to find fault with the President and the Secretary of State, or at least quote others who find fault, as though there might be something in it. Here I am willing to make a direct issue with your authorities"¹⁵ Interestingly, he went on to defend Seward at length, but not Lincoln. So his righteous indignation was a matter of principle regarding the office of President and a matter of partiality regarding Seward, the old family friend. Within ten days he wrote again with the same complaint that lack of support at home made the diplomatic

¹⁴Ford, Cycle I, p. 17.

¹⁵15 October 1861, Ford, Cycle I, pp. 56-57.

mission nearly impossible--but this time he included the President in his indictment:

. . . [every] post from home has sapped the foundations of all confidence in us, in our institutions, our rulers and our honor. How do you suppose we can overcome the effects of the New York Press? How do you suppose we can conciliate men whom our tariff is ruining? How do you suppose we can shut people's eyes to the incompetence of Lincoln or the disgusting behavior of many of our volunteers and officers.¹⁶

Letters from Charles Francis, Jr., who was still at home in Boston but desirous of joining the military, fueled the fire of Adams' displeasure. By November he wrote that the President was "not equal to the crisis," that the Secretary of War was "corrupt," and that the Secretary of the Navy was "incompetent." Tired of "incompetents," he desired to see Lincoln "forced to adopt a manly line of policy which all men may comprehend." He said Lincoln should supply "energy, not change," and if "Lincoln were only a wise man he could untie them in spite of party cries."¹⁷

Later in that same month, Adams' tone changed from complaint to denunciation when he learned of the "Trent Affair" from newspaper accounts. The furor arose when a British ship at sea was stopped and two Confederate agents aboard removed.

¹⁶ 25 October 1861, Ford, Cycle I, p. 62.

¹⁷ 5 November 1861, Ford, Cycle I, p. 63.

Adams wrote his brother that "If the administration ordered the capture of those men, I am satisfied that our present authorities are very unsuitable persons to conduct a war like this or to remain in the direction of our affairs."¹⁸ Once the men were released and allowed to continue to London, rather than being hanged, the complaints against the President in the letters of all the Adamses lessened to a kind of fretful murmur for many months. Generalship in the Union army became of much greater concern, especially after Charles joined the cavalry.

Although Minister Adams did write his son Charles regarding the desirability of Lincoln's arming the slaves in 1863, it was not until the election year of 1864 that Lincoln and the presidency once more became topics in the Adams family correspondence. In July, Henry Adams wrote Charles that he feared current financial difficulties, the election, and disastrous campaigns would combine to give the "peace-at-any-price" Democrats a victory. Charles responded immediately that things were not as bad as Adams feared they were so he should stop "howling."¹⁹ By October, Adams was convinced his brother was right. His concern for Lincoln's re-election was

¹⁸30 November 1861, Ford, Cycle I, p. 75.

¹⁹8 July 1864, in A Cycle of Adams Letters 1861-1865, ed. Worthington Chauncey Ford (Boston: Houghton, 1920), II, pp. 164-65. Hereafter cited as Ford, Cycle II.

entirely the result of his interest in certain political principles, not in Lincoln as an outstanding leader, though he and the family might drink toasts to Lincoln at the news of his success.

From the point of the second inauguration on, a clearer tone of approval appeared in the Adams correspondence. In writing to his father on March 7, 1865, Charles Francis, Jr., was not only full of praise but actually proud of the man:

What do you think of the inaugural? That rail-splitting lawyer is one of the wonders of the day. Once at Gettysburg and now again on a greater occasion he has shown a capacity for rising to the demands of the hour which we should not expect from orators or men of the schools. This inaugural strikes me in its grand simplicity and directness as being for all time the historical Keynote of the war; . . . what will Europeans think of this utterance of the rude ruler, of whom they have nourished, so lofty a contempt? Not a prince or minister in all Europe could have risen to such equality with the occasion.²⁰

With the close of the war, this approving note continued to be heard, though modified in enthusiasm, in the Adamses' approval of Lincoln's moderate plans for reconstruction. But the assassination followed so quickly upon the inaugural that there was little time for transatlantic communication. The family response was immediate and full of concern for the effect the action would have on the nation. Minister Adams

²⁰Ford, Cycle II, pp. 257-58.

called it "the crowning abomination of this unholy spirit" and an "atrocious crime." But his concern was with the abstractions represented in his mind almost as a tableau of a "Christian Charity" exercised in a policy agreed upon "in the Executive Mansion by the Chief Magistrate in conjunction with the Commander in Chief of the forces" which "Even the most prejudiced of the English are reluctantly constrained to admit . . . was the grandest spectacle seen in a popular government ever since the world began." The actions of the assassins, "puny devils" who "stupidly" and "blindly" thus brought on further "chastisement" to themselves, "set a stigma which will not be effaced or expiated except by long years of thorough reformation."²¹

On vacation in Italy, Henry Adams wrote seriously if less grandly of his feeling. To his English friend Charles Miles Gaskell he spoke as an American responding to another English friend's "being rather proud" that Englishmen were disgusted by the assassination:

To us the assassination of a President is a matter of personal feeling, the result of his qualities as a man. If other people don't feel as we do about it, we might be disgusted, but that they should is so much a matter of course that I should never have doubted it. But as for the nation, pity is wasted. I am too strong an American to have thought for a moment that we are

²¹"Charles Francis Adams to His Son," 28 April 1865, Ford, Cycle II, pp. 265-67.

going to be shaken by a murder.²²

Still in Rome two weeks later, he wrote his brother Charles Francis, Jr., on the same topic, revealing a more personal response at the same time he gave evidence of a characteristic ironic tone and a new maturity in his authorial voice:

I have already buried Mr. Lincoln under the ruins of the Capitol, along with Caesar, and this I don't mean merely as a phrase. We must have our wars, it appears, and our crimes, as well as other countries. I think Abraham Lincoln is rather to be envied in his death, as in his life somewhat; and if he wasn't as great as Caesar, he shows the same sort of tomb. History repeats itself, and if we are to imitate the atrocities of Rome, I find a certain amusement in conducting my private funeral service over the victims, on the ground that is most suitable for such associations, of any in the world.²³

After his return to the United States in 1868, Adams made one last mention of Lincoln in his correspondence, but the comment was a telling one in that it reflected not only Adams' sharp wit but also the rise in estimation Lincoln had merited. To John Hay, Adams' close friend and Lincoln's eventual biographer, he wrote: "A man asked me the other day if I had been at the White House lately, and I told him, No, I want to remember that house as Lincoln left it."²⁴

²²10 May 1865, Ford, Letters I, p. 119.

²³Ford, Letters I, pp. 119-20.

²⁴William Roscoe Thayer, The Life and Letters of John Hay (Boston: Houghton, 1915), I, p. 251.

Over the next few years Adams wrote three essays, the first two for the North American Review, that had occasion to refer to the Lincoln presidency. In these essays a sort of historical distancing could be seen to have taken place that is reflected in the point of view. Accompanying this was a degree of assessment of the presidency, not just that of Lincoln but of the office in general, that was based on a comparison of the Lincoln presidency with that of others. The first essay, written for the October 1876 issue of the North American Review, was entitled "The 'Independents' in the Canvass." Intended primarily to influence voters not to vote for Rutherford B. Hayes, the article contained some interesting comments both on Lincoln and on the office he held. Adams argued that though Hayes was a respectable man, it did not follow that he would make a good president. For "To fill the Presidential chair with success" required not just "good purposes, fair talents, and high character," but "judgment, firmness, insight, and, above all, experience in a much more than ordinary degree; and that he has all these is only shown by trial."²⁵ Lest anyone point out Lincoln's relative inexperience in the same position, Adams forstalled them by asserting that he had "sustained himself through the most trying canvass in the history of the country against the ablest

²⁵Adams, "The 'Independents' in Canvass," p. 307.

and most unscrupulous of all Democratic leaders [Stephen Douglas]."²⁶ His praise of Lincoln continued in his argument against disallowing presidents to run for re-election as a way of ending the spoils system. He said Americans should not have to deprive themselves of the re-election of such men as Washington, Madison, and Lincoln.²⁷ (As he had not yet begun his intensive study of Jefferson and Madison, his mentioning Madison in such company was unintentionally ironic rather than sarcastic.) He also praised Lincoln for always recognizing one important fact:

No President in this country can carry on an administration to suit himself on sentimental or guerrilla or Ishamalite principles. He has got to have a party behind him, or fail.²⁸

He must also pick his cabinet from among "his unsuccessful competitors in the nominating convention" and from "those who brought about his nomination and subsequent election." It is through such "political usage" and "political courtesy" that the political system works; without common sense as well, of course, corruption may result, but without the system the President can have no effective support and thus no "responsible," as opposed to "personal," administration. Lincoln

²⁶ Adams, "The 'Independents' in Canvass," p. 307.

²⁷ Adams, "The 'Independents' in Canvass," p. 307.

²⁸ Adams, "The 'Independents' in Canvass," p. 313.

was aware of the necessity for such support and his recognition of it "saved his administration."²⁹

The second essay, entitled "Civil Service Reform," was printed in October, 1879. In it Adams condemned the fact that executive patronage had fallen into the hands of the legislature. He claimed that the assumption by members of Congress of their right to local patronage appointments was first conceded in principle by the first administration of Lincoln, in 1861. The results of the concession were a giving over to the legislature the independence of the Executive as a "co-ordinate branch of government." The executive thereby lost "moral weight" and "individual power," which was serious enough. But Lincoln's death was the "accidental cause" of bringing about a greater evil and an actual loss in the "absolute power" of the executive because it paved the way for the Republican political machine and the scandalous interchange between the Senate and Andrew Johnson for the "spoils."³⁰ Whether the apparent shift in position suggested by these two essays was as yet a real one, or merely a matter of political expediency on the part of Henry Adams, the reform journalist, is open to question, though the latter possibility is certainly the more probable; for in a third essay, "The

²⁹Adams, "The 'Independents' in Canvass," p. 313.

³⁰Adams, "Civil Service Reform," "The Great Secession Winter of 1860-61" and Other Essays, pp. 103-4.

Declaration of Paris, 1861," which was written at about the same time but not published until fifteen or more years later, Adams spoke of Lincoln as President in a tone that was fairly neutral, though more approving than not. The specific subject matter was an instance of foreign policy, however, and not the spoils system, so the question of a change of position remained open for another decade.

Then in the History Adams clearly stated his judgment about Lincoln and Jefferson being the only two subjects in nineteenth-century American history worthy of serious study, and he went on to explain that Lincoln's statesmanship had succeeded where Jefferson's had failed. They had both been faced with situations that threatened to destroy the Union, but only Lincoln had been bold enough to take the strong action required to save the Union. In addition to being a man capable of taking effective action Lincoln also acted with proper motives, as his position on slavery and reconstruction had demonstrated. Adams had started out criticizing Lincoln's appearance and doubting his intelligence, but he came to acknowledge that Lincoln had ability, integrity, knowledge and unselfishness, all the ideal qualities he attributed to Albert Gallatin except social fitness. His only fault appeared to be that he could not quash the patronage system in the Senate. His combination of pragmatism with sensitivity to the need for justice, decency and honor made him a candidate

for Adams' ideal statesman. Adams acknowledged that Lincoln had come to represent the best product of American democracy:

Of all presidents, Abraham Lincoln has been considered the most typical representative of American society, chiefly because his mind, with all its practical qualities, also inclined, in certain directions, to idealism.³¹

Had Adams not made references in private correspondence to the worthiness of Lincoln, it might be possible to lay too much emphasis on the possibility of an ironic intent in the passage quoted above from the History. But Adams was not qualifying his assessment of Lincoln.

Adams' close friend John Hay had been a sort of junior secretary to Lincoln and had admired him greatly. When Hay decided to collaborate with John Nicolay on a ten-volume biography of Lincoln, Adams encouraged him, offering editorial advice as well as praise. The Lincoln biography and Adams' own History were finished at about the same time, and Adams must have felt that he and Hay had appropriated to themselves all of nineteenth-century American history that was significant. He certainly admired the book, the subject, and the author, as he suggested to friends at Harvard that the book was "a monument to the greatest man of our time" and thus deserved some particular recognition.³²

³¹History, I, 171.

³²"To Charles William Eliot," 12 June 1892, Ford, Letters, II, p. 8.

Because Lincoln, like Washington, was mythologized by the American public, it was not necessary for Adams to "invent" him in the same sense that he claimed to have invented Jefferson, Gallatin and Burr. Lincoln gained symbolic adequacy all on his own, and Adams acknowledged that in the History. But in The Education, Abraham Lincoln became considerably more symbolically significant than he had been as a mere "representative type" of the American character.

In The Education, Adams re-examined his experience of the Lincoln presidency--apparently in an autobiographical fashion, but surely in an ironical mode. It is not Lincoln, however, who is treated ironically, but Adams' persona. Explaining his early support of Lincoln, he said, "Every young man naturally accepted the wishes of Mr. Lincoln as orders, the more because he could see that the new President was likely to need all the help that several million young men would be able to give, if they counted on having any President at all to serve."³³ He used the remembered inauguration, so uncommented upon at the time, in what begins as a deceptively simple description in the autobiographical narration:

Had young Adams been told that his life was to hang on the correctness of his estimate of the new President, he would have lost. He saw Mr. Lincoln but once at the melancholy function called an Inaugural Ball. Of course he looked anxiously for a sign of

³³Education, p. 103.

character. He saw a long, awkward figure; a plain, ploughed face; a mind, absent in part, and in part evidently worried by white kid gloves; features that expressed neither self-satisfaction nor any other familiar Americanism, but rather the same painful sense of becoming educated and of needing education that tormented a private secretary; above all a lack of apparent force. Any private secretary in the least fit for his business would have thought, as Adams did, that no man living needed so much education as the new President but that all the education he could get would not be enough.³⁴

Some pages further along in the chapter called "Chaos," he used the Lincoln figure in the abstract as an opportunity for discussing the American character in Washington, as opposed to that in New York or Chicago: "There the American showed himself, four times in five as a quiet, peaceful, shy figure, rather in the mould of Abraham Lincoln, somewhat sad, sometimes pathetic, once tragic; or like Grant" ³⁵

The assassination, which had moved him to write with depth of feeling at the time, continued to make him do so in retrospect:

The assassination of President Lincoln fell on the party while they were in Rome, where it seemed singularly fitting to that nursery of murderers and murdered, as though America were also getting educated. Again one went to meditate on the steps of Santa Maria in Ara Coeli, but the lesson seemed as shallow

³⁴Education, p. 107.

³⁵Education, p. 297.

as before. Nothing happened. The travelers changed no plan or movement. The Minister did not recall them to London. The season was over before they returned; and when the private secretary sat down again at his desk in Portland Place before a mass of copy in arrears, he saw before him a world so changed as to be beyond connection with the past. His identity, if one could call a bundle of disconnected memories an identity, seemed to remain; but his life was once more broken into separate pieces; he was a spider and had to spin a new web in some new place with a new attachment.³⁶

Lincoln's assassination joined Adams' sister's death and Charles Sumner's betrayal of friendship and principle as one of the shocks of Adams' life. Speaking both as author and persona Adams explained that "the profoundest lessons are not the lessons of reason; they are sudden strains that permanently warp the mind."³⁷

A difference in the tone and diction choices in passages describing the same events but written at different times revealed Adams' mature ironic mode at work in The Education. But more than a growth in artistic method, the comparison revealed Adams developing metaphors from the historical material. In the beginning Abraham Lincoln was simply a Republican president whose actions might bring political trouble for the party and the nation. As he became a figure

³⁶Education, p. 209.

³⁷Education, p. 108.

of national importance, he began to affect the image of the office he held so that he became representative of the principles of the past as he actually determined the historical future of the office. In addition, he became a representative type of the American character and a metaphor for Adams' own "sense of self."³⁸ That metaphor led indubitably to the symbolic failure of education. Although Lincoln himself turned out to be the strongest and ablest president of the nineteenth century and although for a time he succeeded to a considerable degree, in the end he too became a victim of circumstances beyond his control. Thus he too, in a sense, became an example of the failure of education.

³⁸John Carlos Rowe, Henry Adams and Henry James: The Emergence of a Modern Consciousness (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1976), p. 111.

CHAPTER V

THE MEN OF THE PEOPLE: U. S. GRANT AND OTHERS

In July, 1868, when Henry Adams returned to the United States after a seven year's absence, he was thirty years old and ready to begin a serious career. Remembering perhaps his earlier advice to his brother Charles Francis, Jr., that what the country needed was "a national set of young men like ourselves or better, to start new influences . . . in politics" and elsewhere,¹ he turned his attention--not surprisingly--to politics. He was not an admitted office seeker, but he did intend to be of political consequence. At first he sought an avenue to power in Washington as a reform-minded journalist. When that road did not take him to his desired goal, he returned to Boston as editor of the North American Review, which he attempted to make a voice of reform in the land. When that course seemed blocked to him, he returned to Washington and once more sought to become a mover behind the political scene as a social arbiter, but that way also led to disappointment and to an oft-repeated lament that a friend in power was a friend lost.

He began his career as a reformer by moving to Washington, D. C., after a mere two-months' visit with friends and relatives in Boston. At this time in his life his general outlook

¹Samuels I, pp. 145-46.

as well as his political philosophy was still influenced primarily by family ideals. Thus his ideas of reform rested on two basic premises: first, that government must be purged of the corruption created by the political party system; and second, that all items of national business needed to be debated in terms of moral and constitutional principles.²

During his first few days in Washington, Adams was the guest of his friend William Evarts, newly appointed attorney general. Adams attributed the appointment to Evarts' "saving the President in the Impeachment by his skill as Counsel." These fortuitous circumstances led to Adams' being taken to call upon President Andrew Johnson, whom he found to be "grave and cordial" and who gave him "a little lecture on constitutional law."³ His interest in Johnson at the time was minimal. He had admired Johnson's resistance to the secessionists in the winter of 1860-61, and he had approved of Johnson's mild reconstruction policies, but by the fall of 1868, Adams' greatest concern was with the usurpation of Executive power by the Congress. Johnson's term as President had resulted in confusion and corruption in the federal government, and Henry Adams aspired to set things to rights. He expected to be aided by the new President. His disappointment in that expectation must

²Hochfield, p. 2.

³"To Charles Milnes Gaskell," 5 November 1868, Ford, Letters I, p. 147.

have been primarily responsible for the changed emphasis in his description of his meeting with President Johnson as it appeared in The Education thirty-eight years later.

Perhaps vanity kept Adams from including a reference to the discussion of his own youth when he recounted his interview to his English friend Gaskell, but the author's thematic intent surely explained the exclusion of all other topics of conversation in the later version of the meeting. The tone of the first account conveyed Adams' pleasure at getting his career off to such a quick start as an acquaintance with the President might suggest, his vanity at being treated so cordially, and his youthful arrogance in condescending toward a man only recently saved from impeachment by others and already without the power of his office who dares give a "little lecture." The older Adams' mockery of the young man he had been was evident in his later account:

The interview was brief and consisted in the stock remark common to monarchs and valets, that the young man looked even younger than he was. The young man felt even younger than he looked.⁴

It was only in retrospect that the young man felt even younger than he had looked. One of the central techniques Adams used in The Education was the re-evaluation of past experience in the light of the conclusions of his political education. His treatment of Seward, Sumner, Lincoln, Johnson, and Grant gave

⁴Education, p. 245.

particular evidence of how the technique worked. Although the factual details of his accounts of these men might remain more or less the same, his interpretations and assessments of his experiences changed. His treatment of political figures, senators and presidents specifically, became a symbolic focal point for his conclusions.

Thus, in The Education Adams' description of the interview with Andrew Johnson was followed by an explanation of his own youthful ignorance and hints of the general failure of political education:

He never saw the President again, and never felt a wish to see him, for Andrew Johnson was not the sort of man whom a young reformer of thirty with two or three foreign educations, was likely to see with enthusiasm; yet, musing over the interview as a matter of education, long years afterwards, he could not help recalling the President's figure with a distinctness that surprised him. The old-fashioned Southern Senator and statesman sat in his chair at his desk with a look of self-esteem that had its value. None doubted. All were great men; some, no doubt, were greater than others; but all were statesmen and all were supported, liked, inspired by the moral certainty of rightness. To them the universe was serious, even solemn, but it was their universe, a Southern conception of right. . . . Slavery was only a part of the Southern system, and the life of it all--the vigor--the poetry--was its moral certainty of self. The Southerner could not doubt; and this self-assurance not only gave Andrew Johnson the look of a true President, but it actually made him one. When Adams came to look back on it afterwards, he was surprised to realize how strong the

Executive was in 1868--perhaps the strongest he was ever to see it. Certainly he never again found himself so well satisfied, or so much at home.⁵

In the last line of this passage Adams clearly indicated the reason for the failure of the Adams persona's political education. At the close of the Civil War there were forces at work in the country--especially in the economy--that changed the country itself and allowed a new political type to rise to power. The old New England statesmen and the old Southern statesmen--both virtuous types--gave way before the midwestern politicians with their rich New York connections.

Although it did not take him long to learn, Adams was not at first aware of what sort of political force Ulysses S. Grant was. He probably did not vote for Grant because he was in Washington at the time, but he certainly favored Grant's election.⁶ During the war years his soldier-brother Charles Francis, Jr., had written the family praising General Grant. He had described Grant as a quiet, unlikely looking man who could work hard and who could manage men. Grant, he said, was "a man of exquisite judgment and tact" against whom others

⁵ Education, pp. 245-46.

⁶ Although Adams claimed in The Education that he had voted for Grant in the 1868 election, Ernest Samuels has pointed out that Adams was still registered to vote in Massachusetts, which did not permit absentee balloting at the time. Samuels I, p. 336.

"would instinctively lean."⁷ Another time he wrote that Grant was "a man of such infinite resource and ceaseless activity" that "scarcely does one scheme fail before he has another on foot."⁸ It was hardly surprising that Adams should have come to expect great things from a man his older brother, a battle-tried veteran, had claimed to have "unbounded confidence in," but what brother Charles Francis, Jr., had perceived in war as "all the simplicity of a very great man"⁹ soon appeared to Henry Adams as all the simplicity of a very stupid man.

As soon as the election was over, Adams wrote his English friend Gaskell that although his family could expect no improvement in its political fortunes from the "new reign," his own "great step" of moving to Washington had been taken; and he was settled there "for years" with his "eyes and ears . . . wide open," intending "to be seen and heard as well as see and hear."¹⁰ The first order of business he meant to be seen and heard on was civil service, tariff and currency reform.

⁷"To Charles Francis Adams, Sr.," 29 May 1864, Ford, Cycle II, p. 135.

⁸"To Henry Adams," 13 August 1864, Ford, Cycle II, p. 181.

⁹"To Abigail Brooks Adams," 27 August 1864, Ford, Cycle II, p. 185

¹⁰5 November 1868, Ford, Letters I, pp. 147-48.

The war had brought about an enormous increase in the power of Congress; Adams and his friends were particularly concerned with the spoils system whereby Congress had, in effect, come to assume as its own the President's right of appointment. This usurpation of presidential power had produced an imbalance that threatened the character of the American government as Adams perceived it in the light of the family ideals he had inherited. He hoped to help restore those presidential privileges the Senate had usurped in its struggle with President Johnson. To that end he wrote an article for the North American Review on the 1868-69 session of the Fortieth Congress. In it he complained that the re-establishment of the Executive in its privileges and proper functions was an issue needing to be immediately tended to, yet the Congress spent its time on trivial matters of interest to lobbyists. He called for the repeal of the Tenure-of-Office Act of 1867 which had been the result of the power struggle between Congress and President Johnson. (The act was finally repealed in 1886.) And he warned the President-elect not to place himself in isolation in the months before the inauguration:

We do not mean by this to express any unfavorable opinion of General Grant's Cabinet, to which this review has only good wishes and support to offer; but it is obvious, that, if the balance of our government is to be restored, there must be no more mistakes in Administration, and no hazardous experiments, whose

failure may shake public confidence. We shall have something to say presently of the reforms which the Executive should attempt; but its immediate policy is one of caution and conciliation, not one of heroism. The mere repeal of the Tenure-of-Office Bill cannot at once restore its prestige, or wrest from Congress the initiative which Congress is now accustomed to exercise. The Senate has no idea of abandoning its control of power, either with or without the Tenure-of-Office Bill; and the people alone, acting upon the lower House, after a fair trial of the new Administration can re-establish the Presidency in spite of the Senate, and restore harmony to the political system. General Grant and his Cabinet, no matter whether they are men of metal or men of straw, must accept the fact that our system of government has practically suffered a modification, from which no power but that of patient wisdom can retrieve it; and if the influence of General Grant himself, or his Cabinet, is exerted in the direction of isolated action, however brilliant, the chances are that our system will be permanently fixed on a new and not an improved basis.¹¹

"The Session" was so well received that Adams seemed justified in thinking he could achieve success in his new career. He wrote Gaskell, "For once I have smashed things generally and really exercised a distinct influence on public opinion by acting on a limited number of cultivated minds."¹² What he actually achieved was a degree of journalistic fame that prepared the way eventually for an offer of the editorship

¹¹Adams, "The Session, 1869," p. 68-69.

¹²17 May 1868, Ford, Letters I, p. 159.

of the North American Review. There was no sign that President Grant was influenced by his advice.

In private correspondence written between the election and the inauguration, Adams indicated his early disillusionment with Grant. He advised his brother Charles Francis, Jr., that he pitied the man that went into Grant's Cabinet: "You are more hopeful than me if you expect to be pleased by it [the Cabinet]. We look for a reign of western mediocrity."¹³ Two weeks later, Adams reported that "the home appointments are not what we want. I am afraid there is more favoritism than public good in them. It's the old game with fresh cards."¹⁴ After less than a month in office, the Grant Administration looked worse to Adams than its predecessor:

Coelum non animan mutant qui norum Presidentem eligunt. It is the old régime, and Grant is, between ourselves, less capable than Johnson. I am astonished by his behavior, but I am even more puzzled than astonished, for I can read it only in one sense. Well! at the end of the end, we shall succeed if we have one single element in Gen. Grant--that of intelligence. But what I see and hear makes me often think with a horrible shudder of John's remark, which you quoted to me, that Grant's mind was of the same order, if not of the same

¹³ 23 February 1869, Ford, Letters I, p. 152.

¹⁴ "To Charles Francis Adams, Jr.," 11 March 1869, Ford, Letters I, p. 152.

degree, as Ward Forthingham's.¹⁵

Ward Forthingham's stupidities have not survived the proverbial test of time, but Grant's were eventually to be immortalized by the scandals of his administration.

As yet, however, Adams' disappointment in the new Administration did little to dampen his spirits. He was curious to see what would happen, and he intended to be a part of it. He followed his April article on the Congressional session with one on civil service reform in the October North American Review. That article, which Adams intended to distribute in a pamphlet form to members of Congress, was an extension of the argument he had begun in the earlier article, but this time Grant was censured by implication in a technique Adams would use with considerable skill in the History: ironical apologia.

Adams claimed that Grant's popular majority in the previous year's election had given him "a greater power than any President chosen for many years, or likely to be chosen for many years to come."¹⁶ A discussion of Grant's virtues followed: he had been believed to be honest and persevering;

¹⁵"To Charles Francis Adams, Jr.," 29 March 1869, Ford, Letters I, p. 153.

¹⁶Adams, "Civil Service Reform," p. 97.

he had not been tied to any party or special interest group; his military training was thought to have made him efficient, effective, and able to make moral distinctions:

His non-partisan character, his military training, his inheritance of an administrative system in which the two great parties divided the patronage, and, above all, his frank and open expressions of opinion, publicly reported and undenied, all seemed to point to a very moderate exercise of executive power. . . . [In the matter of civil service reform, everyone] would have thought nothing more easy than for the President to lift his Administration by a single touch, out of the mire of political corruption.¹⁷

But that was not what happened. Adams suggested that the President might have intended to institute reform, as he had indeed told cabinet members not to make mass removals on account of "political opinion." Then answering his own question concerning why the order had not been carried into effect, Adams said that Grant's good intentions failed through no fault of his own. The system was responsible. Grant failed first because he had to listen "with patience" and reply "with courtesy to the leading men of his party" as a part of his presidential duty: "A Senator may be tedious, ill-mannered, and a notorious rogue, but the double majesty of State and Senate speaks from his lips and commands a hearing." Grant failed secondly because it was customary to justify removals:

¹⁷ Adams, "Civil Service Reform," p. 98.

"To act upon the new rule without suitable notice was unfair to his friends; for however just the reform might be in the abstract, in practice it would be considered a refusal of confidence to individuals and would tend to discredit them in the eyes of their constituents." Thus the President would lose friends in Congress, and Democrats would be elected in their places. The third and fourth reasons for Grants's failure were the appeals made to him on the grounds of personal friendship and the intriguing that would bring charges (usually unfounded) against this or that office holder.¹⁸ In support of his assertion that the system, not the man, was responsible for the continued corruption, Adams detailed at considerable length the history of the development of the spoils system through earlier administrations. Once finished with the apologia, Adams made his point clearly that had Grant, coming into office with the power of popularity behind him, perservered, he might have been able to restore the office of President to its proper position in the balance of executive, legislative and judicial powers that the Constitution was intended to insure. Instead, Grant proved the "slow-moving idol of faction."¹⁹

Though he published several other articles in the Nation

¹⁸ Adams, "Civil Service Reform," pp. 100-1.

¹⁹ Adams, "Civil Service Reform," p. 105.

and the North American Review which treated the Grant Administration satirically, Adams continued for a time to believe that his journalistic efforts might spur the administration to assert "large principles" and accept "high responsibilities."²⁰ He bragged to his friend Gaskell,

I am . . . getting the reputation of a regular conspirator . . . I am already deeper in the confidence of the present Government than I was with the last, although it was friendly and this is a little hostile. . . . nearly every member of the Cabinet is in perfect sympathy with me in abusing themselves. You see there is a line of division in the Cabinet, and I am on the side which has the strongest men, and Reform is always a sure card.²¹

But his friends' strength did not last long: most of them were out of power in a short while, and reform did not turn out to be a sure card after all.

During his bachelor years in Washington, Adams also wrote a number of articles on fiscal reform. While still in England he had prepared two essays on British finance for the North American Review which showed considerable improvement in his journalistic skills. His initial interest in the subject arose from the Adams family's concern with legal tender acts, paper currency and the suspension of specie payment in war-torn

²⁰Henry Adams, "Men and Things in Washington," Nation, 9 (November 25, 1869), 456. Unsigned.

²¹7 December 1869, Ford, Letters I, pp. 173-74.

America. Much of the family correspondence during those war years had been concerned with currency problems at home. Perhaps because of the favorable reviews the articles received and because of the range of knowledge of economics he had acquired in his research, Adams continued his literary efforts on financial matters once he was at home again. Two of his new articles were published in American periodicals, but a third ("American Finance, 1865-1869") appeared in the April 1869 issue of the prestigious Edinburgh Review. The editor had been so enthusiastic about it that when the corrected proofs were lost in transit, he had published it "misprints and all."²² Passing the editor's comments along to his brother Charles Francis, Jr., Adams wrote, "Reeve says it is the best article on American affairs ever printed in an English periodical and that he attaches the greatest importance to it." In this same letter, Adams expressed the hope that his comments in the article would make him "unpopular."²³ What he intended was that his journalism should effect fiscal reform as well as political change. He called his April articles "firecrackers," but the explosions he had set off fell on

²² Samuels I, p. 178.

²³ Quoted in Samuels I, p. 178. The original source is not identified further.

deaf ears.²⁴ He had hoped to educate the general public, the Congress, and the new President--to move them away from wild financial theories that defied his ideas of the laws of economics--but even his attempt to expose the villainy of Jay Gould and James Fisk in cornering the gold market and creating a financial panic was a greater literary success than a political one. Adams' financial interests continued throughout his life, and he studied foreign exchanges and the movement of bullion in his search for a theory of history, but he wrote no more articles on financial topics. His efforts had led neither to the desired reform nor to the acquisition of personal power, but they had brought Adams to the conclusion that he lived in an economic rather than a political age.

After less than two years' residence in Washington, Adams returned to Boston to accept a position as editor of the North American Review and assistant professor of medieval history at Harvard. Exactly why he left a situation in which he had been personally quite happy is not known. Perhaps the ouster of his political contacts within the administration made Washington less attractive to him. Perhaps he simply gave in to family pressure to take the job and lead a more respectable life after having suffered through the trauma of watching his favorite

²⁴"To Charles Milnes Gaskell," 30 March 1869, Ford, Letters I, p. 154.

sister's slow, agonizing death from tetanus in the summer of 1870. Perhaps he intended to make the North American Review an organ of the political Independents and reform Republicans with whom he had aligned himself. Perhaps he even had ambitions of influencing in the classroom a new "set" of young men who would "start new influences." Whatever his motives, he had not yet abandoned his role as a reformer, but had simply moved to a new stage.

As an editor Adams found himself with far less time for writing than he had had previously. During the years he served as editor, he wrote only one political article and that in collaboration with his brother Charles. He did other writing, or course, but most of that was in the form of book reviews--twenty-four to be exact. He spent much of the time he did have when free from classroom responsibilities looking for advertisements to support the costs of printing the North American Review and authors willing to take the time to write articles that supported the Independents' political interests. He had considerable difficulty finding either. It was not until October of 1876 that Adams succeeded in producing an issue with the political emphasis he desired. That issue, which contained his own article "The Independents in Canvass," was the occasion of his severing his relationship with the North American Review and returning to Washington--this time as a historian and not as a journalist.

Before that Rubicon was crossed, however, Adams' continuing political interest led him to active involvement with mugwumpery. "What a hard fate it is," he wrote his friend Jacob Dolson Cox, "that we, who want to help build up the executive, should be compelled to resist it!"²⁵ Many of the reformers he had met in Washington had belonged to a group that called themselves the Liberal Republicans. (The word liberal referred to their espousal of laissez-faire ideas.) Adams' associates in the new party were David Wells, the economist; Jacob Dolson Cox, briefly Grant's Secretary of the Interior; Samuel Bowles, editor of the Springfield, Massachusetts, Republican; Edwin L. Godkin, editor of the Nation; Henry Watterson, editor of the Louisville Courier-Journal; Murat Halstead, editor of the Cincinnati-Commercial; William Cullen Bryant, editor of the New York Evening Post; Arthur George Sedgwick, editor of the Atlantic Monthly; his own brother Charles Francis Adams, Jr.; and Carl Schurz, Republican senator from Missouri and chief organizer of the party until he accepted a position as Secretary of the Interior in Rutherford B. Hayes' Cabinet. These men and others of kindred interest joined together in an attempt to prevent Grant from winning a second term in office. In 1872 the party held a convention and nominated as candidate for the

²⁵ 17 November 1870, Cater, p. 48.

presidency Horace Greeley, whom the Democrats also chose. Adams had been involved in early meetings, discussing such issues as lowering the tariffs, reconciliation with the South, and civil service reform; but he refused to attend the convention, and he did not support Greeley. He had hoped the party's reform policies would find popular support at the polls; but of Greeley he said, "If the Gods insist on making Mr. Greeley our President, I give up."²⁶

After the election, Adams continued his efforts to combat Grantism. By the time of the 1876 presidential campaign, the Liberal Republican movement had collapsed, but many of its old leaders set out to organize a new party of the center that would be powerful enough to force a reform candidate on one or the other of the major parties. Carl Schurz was again selected as the party's leader, and there was much political scheming on Adams' part, including an attempt to buy a newspaper as a party vehicle and the drafting of a letter inviting Independents to meet after the conventions of the major parties to discuss which candidate they could support. By the end of August, however, Carl Schurz had agreed to support the official Republican candidate (for which he was rewarded with a cabinet post). And Adams spoke mockingly of that

²⁶ "To Charles Milnes Gaskell," 30 May 1872, Ford, Letters I, p. 226.

"rope of sand, the Independent party."²⁷ He wrote his friend and former student Henry Cabot Lodge:

Politics have ceased to interest me. I am satisfied that the machine can't be smashed this time. As I feared, we have ourselves saved it by a foolish attempt to run it, which we never shall succeed in. The Caucus and the machine will outlive me, and that being the case, I prefer to leave this greatest of American problems to shrewder heads than mine. When the day comes on which it will be considered as disgraceful to be seen in a caucus as to be seen in a gambling house or brothel, then my interest will wake up again and legitimate politics will get a new birth.²⁸

In his last political essay for the North American Review, he gave public voice to his political dissatisfaction when he advised voters not to be concerned with party platforms or the candidates' past histories in deciding how to cast their ballots. They should instead be concerned primarily with the issue of civil service reform and thus vote for the Democratic candidate, Samuel J. Tilden. Adams' argument was that Tilden's election would bring about some degree of reform in one of two ways: either he would refuse to execute the patronage demands of a Republican Congress, or his mass removals of office holders would so anger the public as to ensure a reform

²⁷"To Henry Cabot Lodge," 4 September 1876, Ford, Letters I, p. 299.

²⁸24 June 1876, Ford, Letters I, p. 290.

policy among Republicans in the next presidential election. This article and others criticizing the incompetence and corruption of the Republican record made the October, 1876, issue of the North American Review a sell-out; but the journal's publishers were initially timid about publishing it and because of their complaints Adams resigned as editor. Politics had not, as he had claimed to Lodge, ceased to interest him: Boston had. He was ready to change the scene, and if his rôle as reform journalist was ending he was to remain a critic of the government and the men who governed.

From the time he returned to Washington in November of 1877 until his wife's suicide in December, 1885, Adams lived and worked in the world he loved best. Soon after he and Clover (Marian Hooper Adams) were settled to their comfort in a house on H Street overlooking Lafayette Square and the White House, Adams wrote Charles Milnes Gaskell about the move:

We have made a great leap in the world;
cut loose at once from all that has
occupied us since our return from Europe,
and caught new ties and occupations here.
The fact is, I gravitate to a capital
by a primary law of nature. This is
the only place in America where society
amuses me, or where life offers variety.
Here, too, I can fancy that we are of
use in the world, for we distinctly
occupy niches which ought to be filled.²⁹

²⁹ 25 November 1877, Ford, Letters I, p. 302.

The place he and his wife hoped to fill was that of social arbiters. To a considerable extent they were successful. Houses they desired to enter in Washington were open to them, but theirs was open only to the select. Those invited to their social gatherings came. Adams had claimed in 1874 that the more he saw of "official life" in the nation's capital, the less he was "inclined to enter it"; but it amused him to see politicians "wiggle," and it gave him "a lofty sense of . . . [his] own importance to be able to smile contemptuously on men in high places."³⁰ The mockery of such a statement was two-edged because of the truth it held. He did find Washington amusing, and he did relish his own perception of his social and intellectual superiority, as his and his wife's letters attested. He also wished, no doubt, to have those of his political friends who came into power listen to what he said in his wife's salon and to act upon it. In this ambition, however, he was to fail; but in the meanwhile he continued to "hob-nob with the leaders of both parties" and to act "contented under . . . [his] cloak of historian."³¹

During the years they lived on the square, the Adamses

³⁰"To Charles Milnes Gaskell," 13 February 1874, Ford, Letters I, p. 258.

³¹"To Charles Milnes Gaskell," 14 April 1877, Ford, Letters I, p. 300.

had four Presidents for neighbors: Rutherford B. Hayes, James A. Garfield, Chester A. Arthur, and Grover Cleveland. The Hayeses were the only Presidential family they socialized with, and even that relationship got off to a slow start and only began at all because Mrs. Hayes sent a housewarming gift of fresh cut flowers to the Adamses when they moved in. After all, Henry Adams had favored Tilden in the campaign and had written privately to disparage the Republican party's candidate as "one Hayes of Ohio, a third rate nonentity, whose only recommendation is that he is obnoxious to no one."³² Adams distrusted midwestern politicians and he expected Hayes to be, at best, a plodder. But Hayes showed himself to be a respectable man and if not a brilliant President, a steady one. So Adams came to respect and even like him. For one thing, the general situation in the government improved; though Hayes had a hard fight with the Congress, corruption decreased and reform legislation became possible. The change in Adams' attitude was clearly reflected in a letter he wrote Henry Cabot Lodge from England regarding Massachusetts' role in the 1880 Republican convention:

If Sherman is withdrawn, then let the State give its vote to the most respectable candidate on the list, but I confess

³²"To Charles Milnes Gaskell," 14 June 1876, Ford, Letters I, p. 288.

I think it ought in that case, as a mere matter of respect to a most successful administration, to throw one complimentary vote for Hayes [who had refused to run for re-election].³³

When Hayes left the White House, the Adamses paid their own personal compliments to the outgoing President by attending a farewell dinner where Mrs. Adams--typically--found fault with the new White House china.³⁴ Though the discriminating Adamses hardly considered the midwestern Hayeses their social peers, they had even less contact with the Hayeses' successors. It was to be twenty years before Henry Adams was again invited to dine at the White House.

In 1880, as James A. Garfield took the office of President, Adams made his last effort to get the general public to move for government reform. As a reform-minded journalist and editor, he had thought he could enrage the public by exposing incompetence and corruption in high government places, and thereby get them to remove bad men from office. He made another attempt--this time as a novelist--to teach the voting

³³13 May 1880, Ford, Letters I, p. 323.

³⁴The waspish note of social snobbery so evident in Adams' correspondence in this period was in part due to the influence of his wife, who was reputed to have a sharp wit and a sharper tongue. In his grief after her death, Adams became even more shrill in his doomsday prognostications and his denunciations of Jews and "goldbugs." He himself acknowledged that he often verged on the hysterical and feared he might give way to a complete breakdown from nervous exhaustion. He took to travel as a partial cure. Eventually, in the study of twelfth-century France, he found apparent respite.

public the true nature of politicians. He considered that voters were "fooled because they had not studied human nature closely enough."³⁵ But this time instead of exhorting his readers to do their civic duty, he tried to amuse them into it. Much of the social and political satire in Democracy had its inspiration in Clover Adams' weekly salons. Many of the characters in the novel were modeled after Adams' actual acquaintances, and much of the appeal of the work derived from its witty, gossipy tone. Adams himself felt such an attraction to the environment he re-created that it is hardly surprising his tone conveyed the excitement of his enthusiasm. Describing his feelings upon returning to Washington after a visit to Boston, Adams once wrote his friend John Hay:

I don't know why I should be perfectly happy under such circumstances, but I am. My heart bounds as I tear myself from family, friends, the familiar streets and boyhood associations of the best of all cities, and I rush to clasp in my arms this corrupt and corrupting tombstone of our liberties. Don't tell my secret!³⁶

But he himself had already told that secret. Democracy was probably the popular success it was because Adams so enjoyed despising the things he despised. There was considerably more significance to the novel, however, than the joy Adams derived

³⁵Harbert, p. 46.

³⁶26 November 1882, Ford, Letters I, p. 342.

from kicking such political enemies as Senator James G. Blaine, The Plumed Knight from Maine. That significance lay in the heroine's attempt "to see with her own eyes the action of primary forces; to touch with her own hand the massive machinery of society; to measure with her own mind the capacity of the motive power" in an effort to get "to the heart of the great American mystery of democracy and government."³⁷

Democracy was the first of two novels Adams wrote, neither one of which was a particularly important contribution to the art of fiction. He began it some time in 1879 after the Gallatin had been finished and the History begun. The book, which was both a novel of manners and a novel of ideas, was published anonymously in 1880, and one of the ironies of Adams' career as a writer was that it proved to be more popular and more widely read than any of his other works during his lifetime. The witty and malicious satire which pervaded and controlled the story was the real cause of that popularity. As Adams himself enjoyed the gossip conversations of his wife's salon, it was hardly surprising that the general public liked the insight into that world which the novel revealed. As a number of the characters were but thinly veiled portraits of well known political figures, many a reader and critic alike

³⁷ [Henry Adams], Democracy: An American Novel (New York: Holt, 1880), p. 17.

searched Democracy's pages for hints to the identities of the author's models.

Adams' satiric treatment of scandals in government led to charges by critics of the day that the book was unpatriotic, which seemed to little affect its popularity. Today critics point out more serious flaws in novelistic form, characterization, and tone (which many find too epigrammatic). Despite its inadequacies, Democracy was an important stage in Adams' development as a writer: it allowed him to develop his narrative method so as to invest it with both "drama and movement"; and it provided him the opportunity to examine themes that would be explored again more fully in the History and The Education.³⁸ Adams' early biographer, Elizabeth Stevenson, placed too little emphasis on the role of ideas in Democracy when she said, "The anarchic ideas merely decorate a highly amusing, sensuous impression of a small, bright, bad, and agreeable Capital, perfectly recognizable today."³⁹

The novel was quite serious in its examination of the condition in his own time of that great democratic experiment Adams was exploring concurrently in the earlier period of the History. The story had as its central focus the political

³⁸ Samuels I, p. 303.

³⁹ Stevenson, p. 172.

education of a young widow who, following the death of her husband and child, moved to the nation's capital as part of her search for meaning in her life and an object worth sacrificing herself for:

What she wished to see, she thought, was the clash of interest, the interest of forty millions of people, a whole continent, centering at Washington: guided, restrained, controlled, or unrestrained and uncontrollable, by men of ordinary mould; the tremendous forces of government, and the machinery of society, at work.⁴⁰

But what she discovered about democracy and about herself was not entirely to her satisfaction. She learned that political life was not just riddled with corruption, but actually based on it, that democracy in America in 1880 showed itself to be no better than other forms of government, that it was indeed a government "of the people, by the people, for the benefit of senators."⁴¹ And she learned that political life in such a democracy was corrupting, not just to those who held offices or desired to hold them, but to people of integrity and morality such as herself who might be dazzled and misled into giving in to "the passion for exercising power, for its own sake."⁴² Her response to the lessons Adams taught her about the men who ran

⁴⁰Democracy, p. 18.

⁴¹Democracy, p. 28.

⁴²Democracy, p. 18.

the government and about the corrupting influence of power was to run away to Egypt. Adams seemed to conclude that the ills of democracy were due to the characteristic greed--for material gain and for power--of human nature as it manifested itself in politicians. Individual integrity and morality were threatened by both the enemy without and the enemy within. Only faith in some ideal beyond the individual--like that of the founding fathers in establishing the nation, or Thomas Jefferson in attempting to re-establish it, or Abraham Lincoln in preserving the union--could control the force of human selfishness at work in the government.

Adams' exposé of corruption at work in the American political system centered around the character and deeds of Silas P. Ratcliffe, senator from Illinois. Having established his heroine's situation in life and the nature of her quest, Adams introduced a relative of her deceased husband, a Virginian named John Carrington, who practiced law in Washington. This cousin provided the entry into Washington society that a respectable woman of that day would have needed, and he provided Adams with the sort of character foil for Ratcliffe that Adams liked to use in his historical works. Carrington was a man of about forty "whom life had treated hardly." He, "like most educated Virginians of the old Washington school, . . . had seen from the first that, whatever issue the war took, Virginia and he must be ruined." So at twenty-two he had joined the

rebel army as a private and risen to the rank of major general "always doing scrupulously enough what he conceived to be his duty and never doing it with enthusiasm."⁴³ After the war he had moved to Washington to practice law and so support his mother and sisters. After fourteen years of hard work he had gained some degree of success. Mrs. Lee's unmarried sister Sybil Ross thought him nice, but dull. Mrs. Lee herself was sufficiently wise

. . . to value certain delicacies of age and flavor that were lost upon younger and coarser palates. He talked rather slowly and almost with effort, but he had something of the dignity--others call it stiffness--of the old Virginia school, and twenty years of constant responsibility and deferred hope had added a touch of care that bordered closely on sadness. His great attraction was that he never talked or seemed to think of himself. Mrs. Lee trusted in him by instinct. "He is a type!" said she; "he is my idea of George Washington at thirty."⁴⁴

Much as she liked Carrington, Mrs. Lee was soon strongly attracted to his opposite in character. It was Carrington who took her to the Senate to see Ratcliffe speak, referring to him ironically as "our greatest statesman. . . . the Prairie Giant of Peonia, the favorite Son of Illinois; the man who came within three votes of getting the party nomination for the Presidency last spring, and was only defeated because ten small intriguers are sharper than on big one."⁴⁵ At a

⁴³ Democracy, p. 23.

⁴⁴ Democracy, p. 23.

⁴⁵ Democracy, p. 24.

dinner party soon afterward, she made up her mind to pursue the Senator until she understood him. Her bait was flattery, and she was immediately successful:

In ten minutes Mrs. Lee had this devoted statesman at her feet. She had not studied the Senate without a purpose. She had read with unerring instinct one general characteristic of all Senators, a boundless and guileless thirst for flattery, engendered by daily draughts from political friends and dependents, then becoming a necessity like a dram, and swallowed with a heavy smile of ineffable content. A single glance at Mr. Ratcliffe's face showed Madeleine that she need not be afraid of flattering too grossly; her own self-respect, not his, was the only restraint upon her use of this feminine bait.⁴⁶

Her intention in flattering the Senator (by comparing his profile to that of Daniel Webster) was to discover through him the answer to her questions about democracy:

To her eyes he was the high priest of American politics; he was charged with the meaning of the mysteries, the clue to political hieroglyphics. Through him she hoped to sound the depths of statesmanship and to bring up from its oozy bed that pearl of which she was in search; the mysterious gem which must lie hidden somewhere in politics. She wanted to understand this man; to turn him inside out; to experiment on him and use him as young physiologists use frogs and kittens. If there was good or bad in him, she meant to find its meaning.⁴⁷

⁴⁶Democracy, p. 28.

⁴⁷Democracy, pp. 20-21.

Her investigation involved far more personal risk than she anticipated. Ratcliffe quickly saw the attractions of her relative youth, her beauty, her wealth, her intelligence and her social position. She was just the sort of woman he needed to polish the corners off his coarse western manners and to help him into the White House. He understood her far more quickly and easily than she could have realized, and perhaps better than she knew herself in regard to her desire for power. She soon found herself pursued with intensity by the man she had initially pursued out of curiosity. He appealed to that ambition she was not aware she had by offering her power and influence. When he proposed, he asked her to help him "purify" politics, and to that offer she nearly succumbed. Unable to pierce his hypocrisy and unaware of how he manipulated her by playing on both her desire to sacrifice herself upon some worthy altar (his career) and her desire for power, she nearly agreed to marry him. One of the flaws in the plot of the novel is that she was saved by a dues ex machina in the form of a letter. The only point that could be made in favor of such a resolution was that it strongly emphasized the point Adams made throughout the novel that Ratcliffe was a formidable adversary.

The letter was from John Carrington, who had left it with Mrs. Lee's sister Sybil on the occasion of his leaving the city for a diplomatic mission to Mexico. (Unknown to him, the mission had been arranged by Ratcliffe to get him

conveniently out of the way.) As executor of the estate of one Sam Baker, lobbyist, Carrington had become privy to information implicating Ratcliffe in a bribery arrangement with the Inter-Oceanic Mail Steamship Company. He wrote the particulars of the arrangement in a letter which he instructed Sybil to give to her sister only if Mrs. Lee actually intended to accept Ratcliffe's proposal of marriage. Once she had read the letter, Mrs. Lee believed its contents to be true: "Not only did she believe the charge, but she believed that Mr. Ratcliffe would defend his act."⁴⁸ Which, of course, he did, but not before she had come to terms with her own weakness and self-deception and vanity:

. . . now she saw that in the depth of her soul very different motives [than self-sacrifice] had been at work: ambition, thirst for power, restless eagerness to meddle in what did not concern her, blind longing to escape from the torture of watching other women with full lives and satisfied instincts, while her own life was hungry and sad. For a time she had actually, unconscious as she was of the delusion, hugged a hope that a new field of usefulness was open to her . . . and that here at last was an object for which there would be almost a pleasure in squandering the rest of existence even if she knew in advance that the experiment would fail. Life was emptier now that this dream was over.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Democracy, p. 172.

⁴⁹ Democracy, p. 173.

Those last words might well have been spoken by Adams himself, and there was much of his own quest for the meaning of democracy reflected in his heroine's quest. But Adams was not yet giving up on the experiment. Much of the center section of the novel involved Ratcliffe's power struggle with the new President. Mrs. Lee was not aware of that struggle, except as it was related to her by Ratcliffe--who ever played the victim and the patriot. But the reader was presented with the full range of Ratcliffe's skill as political manipulator, and Adams' purpose was more than that of merely defining Ratcliffe's hypocrisy. Democracy was written for a much wider and more general audience than Adams had been able to reach in his reform articles, and it is probable that he intended his satire to have the animating effect on his audience satirists usually desire. Adams' portrait of Ratcliffe at work was certainly Machiavellian enough to disturb most readers.

There has been much discussion among the critics as to who the models for Ratcliffe and the President were in Democracy. It is obvious that while Senator Blaine and President Hayes contributed some of the characteristics Adams gave to his two fictional characters, they are actually composite figures exhibiting the less attractive characteristics of several other men, including Roscoe Conkling and Ulysses S. Grant. Certainly Hayes' and Andrew Johnson's conflicts with the Senate inspired some of the section on Ratcliffe's contest with the new President. The two fictional characters were representative types,

and as westerners they represented to Henry Adams all that was wrong with contemporary politics.

Had either man been from New England or Virginia, he might have leaned on a tradition of ethical statesmanship that would have restrained his baser instincts, but as he did not, the contest between the two was ignoble. The new President had won only one battle in getting elected; the war was still to be fought and Ratcliffe was a master of guerilla tactics.

As the story opened, the newly-elected President had not actually arrived in the capital, but everyone already acknowledged that Ratcliffe was to be his "stumbling block," that he would be "allowed no peace" unless he made "terms with Ratcliffe," that he would offer Ratcliffe a "choice of State or Treasury Department," and that Ratcliffe would take the Treasury if he took either, "for he . . . [was] a desperate political manager, and . . . [would] want patronage for the next national convention."⁵⁰

The political contest between the new President and the Senator began early. Ratcliffe had lost his party's nomination by falling only three votes short of the majority he needed. The man who received that nomination after dozens of ballots was "a plain Indiana farmer, whose political experience was limited to stump speaking in his native state,

⁵⁰Democracy, p. 24.

and to one term as Governor." He had not been picked for any reason of special merit or competency, but simply because Ratcliffe's enemies wanted to "detach Indiana from Ratcliffe's following."⁵¹ He was not an unusual man, but a true man of the people. Because Adams wished to emphasize the lack of special qualities in the man, he did not give the President-elect a last name. His wife called him Jacob, but otherwise he was called by the title of his office or by terms appropriate to campaign hoop-la. Because he had started work in a quarry, he became known to the public as "The Stone-cutter of the Wabash," or "the Hoosier Quarryman," or "Old Granit" (his own preference), or "Old Granny" (his opposition's favorite).⁵² As an individual, though, he did not exert enough force to establish an identity beyond that given him by campaign slogans and posters.

Adams allowed his readers a moment of doubt as to the potential of such a man: "The new President was, almost as much as Abraham Lincoln or Franklin Pierce, an unknown quantity in political mathermatics."⁵³ His campaign had sometimes made reference to his intention to reform civil service, and rumors of letters from the President-elect which hinted that he

⁵¹ Democracy, p. 90.

⁵² Democracy, p. 91.

⁵³ Democracy, p. 90.

intended to deprive the Ratcliffe coterie of its patronage power reached Washington before the inauguration. Such things might have been evidence that the new President was just the man to restore morality to government and answer in the affirmative Mrs. Lee's question of whether "respectable government" was possible in a democracy.⁵⁴

But Adams soon provided the negative answer in his satiric revelation of the in-coming President's naïveté:

That he was honest, all admitted; that is to say all who voted for him. This is a characteristic of all new presidents. He himself took great pride in his homespun honesty, which is a quality peculiar to nature's noblemen. Owing nothing, as he conceived, to politicians, but sympathizing through every fiber of his unselfish nature with the impulses and aspirations of the people, he affirmed it to be his first duty to protect the people from those vultures, as he called them, those wolves in sheep's clothing, those harpies, those hyenas, the politicians; epithets which, as generally interpreted, meant Ratcliffe and Ratcliffe's friends. His cardinal principle in politics was hostility to Ratcliffe, yet he was not vindictive. He came to Washington determined to be the father of his country; to gain a proud immortality--and a re-election.⁵⁵

To the Washington crowd of patronage seekers, the new President was "a mere accidental intruder--a man whom nobody wanted and everyone ridiculed."⁵⁶ He, in turn, had no idea of the forces

⁵⁴Democracy, p. 47.

⁵⁵Democracy, p. 91.

⁵⁶Democracy, p. 84.

of human greed he was up against, nor of the strength and guile of his adversary, nor, for that matter, of his own inadequacies.

In the weeks prior to the President's arrival in Washington, Senator Ratcliffe had had time to prepare his stratagy. First he had prepared a defence against the President's expected attack

. . . by carrying on a series of imaginary conversations with the new President. He brought up in succession every form of proposition which the President might make to him; every trap which would be laid for him; every sort of treatment he might expect, so that he could not be taken by surprise, and his frank, simple nature could never be at a loss.⁵⁷

Then he acted, going about collecting on past favors and offering new ones in an effort to bring the necessary pressure to bear on the new President:

Ratcliffe's success in his contest with the new President depended on the amount of "pressure" he could employ. To keep himself in the background, and to fling over the head of the raw Chief Magistrate a web of intertwined influences, any one of which alone would be useless, but when taken together were not to be broken through; to revive the lost art of the Roman retiarius, who from a safe distance threw his net over his adversary, before attacking with a dagger; this was Ratcliffe's intention and towards this he had been directing all his manipulations for weeks past.⁵⁸

⁵⁷Democracy, p. 87.

⁵⁸Democracy, p. 89.

Once the President was in office, Ratcliffe piped the tune for the wild "dance of democracy" by which he brought the President around to a position opposite that he had held upon his arrival:

Every device known to politicians was now in full play against the Hoosier Quarryman. State delegations with contradictory requests were poured in upon him. . . . Difficulties were invented to embarrass and worry him. False leads were suggested, and false information carefully mingled with true. A wild dance was kept up under his eyes from daylight to midnight, until his brain reeled with the effort to follow it. Means were also found to convert one of his personal, confidential friends, who had come with him from Indiana and who had more brains or less principle than the others; from him every word of the President was brought directly to Ratcliffe's ear.⁵⁹

Ratcliffe's methods were not long in gaining success. Initially, the President "abandoned his scheme of putting Ratcliffe to immediate political death" and decided instead "to invite him into a Cabinet which was to be specially constructed to thwart and humiliate him."⁶⁰ When Ratcliffe and the President met for the first time, Ratcliffe neither refused nor accepted the offer of the Treasury. He asked for two days in which to come to a decision:

The dance of democracy round the President now began with wilder energy. Ratcliffe launched his last bolts. His two-days' delay was a mere cover for bringing new influences to bear. He needed no delay.

⁵⁹ Democracy, p. 93.

⁶⁰ Democracy, p. 93.

He wanted no time for reflection. The President had undertaken to put him on the horns of a dilemma: either to force him into a hostile and treacherous Cabinet, or to throw on him the blame of a refusal and a quarrel. He meant to embrace one of the horns and impale the President on it, and he felt perfect confidence in his own success. He meant to accept the Treasury and he was ready to back himself with a heavy wager to get the government entirely in his own hands within six weeks. His contempt for the Hooiser Stone-cutter was unbounded, and his confidence in himself more absolute than ever.⁶¹

Within a very short period, the President was ridiculed in the press, "overwhelmed with public business," "muddled by the innumerable visitors to whom he had to listen," and "distracted" to the point that he could not finish his Inaugural Address. He could make no move until he "disposed of Ratcliff"; but Ratcliffe, "thanks to the President's friends, . . . had become indispensable," and "the President had . . . begun to lean on him." Eventually, though the President "thought himself a proud statesman" whose "hand was guiding the destinies of America to his own re-election," Ratcliffe was in control.⁶² His corruption of the new President was complete when the latter came to him with a list of twenty names of "friends of mine" who had to be "looked after."⁶³ This same man had just

⁶¹Democracy, p. 95.

⁶²Democracy, pp. 100-1.

⁶³Democracy, p. 103.

days earlier told Ratcliffe that a fundamental principle of his administration was "that there should be no removals from office except for cause."⁶⁴

Against this background of cynical intrigue in the capital, Adams set a scene of pastoral simplicity in which the main characters of the novel steamed down the Potomac for a picnic at Mount Vernon. On that occasion they engaged in a discussion of the character and significance of George Washington.

In the figure of Washington, Adams had inherited ready-made a fully symbolic President. His work with the symbolism in Democracy may well have led to his use of the other Presidential figures as symbols in later works. He acknowledged Washington's traditional symbolism in the speech of Nathan Gore, a New England literary man and an aspirant to a diplomatic mission:

"It is all very well for you gentlemen to measure General Washington according to your own private twelve-inch carpenter's rule. But what will you say to us New Englanders who never were country gentlemen at all, and never had any liking for Virginia? What did Washington ever do for us? He never even pretended to like us. He never was more than barely civil to us. I'm not finding fault with him; everybody knows that he never cared for anything but Mount Vernon. For all that, we idolize him. To us he is Morality,

⁶⁴Democracy, p. 101.

Justice, Duty, Truth, half a dozen Roman gods with capital letters. He is austere, solitary, grand; he ought to be deified. I hardly feel easy, eating, drinking, smoking here on his portico without his permission, taking liberties with his house"65

In contrast to Gore's adulation, Adams presented two other views. One was that of John Carrington (and most certainly of himself as well), who saw Washington as a real man with a degree of moral integrity which brought him near the level of ideal statesman. Ratcliffe, on the other hand, recognized in Washington neither a deity to be worshiped nor an ideal to be emulated. Rather, he deprecated Washington's actual achievements at the same time he praised the sagacity of his own political generation:

"In those days [when he had been a boy] General Washington was a sort of American Jehovah. But the West is a poor school for reverence. Since coming to Congress I have learned more about General Washington, and have been surprised to find what a narrow base his reputation rests on. A fair military officer, who made many blunders, and who never had more men than would make a full army corps under his command, he got an enormous reputation in Europe because he did not make himself king, as though he ever had a chance of doing it. A respectable, painstaking President, he was treated by the opposition with an amount of deference that would have made government easy to a baby, but it worried him to death. His official papers are fairly done, and contain average good

⁶⁵Democracy, p. 77.

sense such as a hundred thousand men in the United States would now write. . . . This government can show today a dozen men of equal abilities, but we don't deify them."⁶⁶

When a visiting Irish lord asked in puzzlement whether "all this did not make rather a clumsy politician of the father of his country," Ratcliffe replied that Washington was not a politician at all in the modern sense of the word because he had "stood outside politics."⁶⁷ Ratcliffe had clearly missed the revelant point about Washington that Adams wanted to make: it was because he stood outside politics, it was because he did not yearn to have power--to be king, that he offered a model worth emulating. Like other men Adams admired, Washington would rather have been at home than in political power: thus his service to his country was not self-serving.

When Mrs. Lee asked why such honest behavior as Washington's was no longer possible, Carrington's satiric remark that he was "too respectable" for modern times roused Ratcliffe to a defense of contemporary politics that actually explained Adams' condemnation of the same:

"Public men," he broke out, "cannot be dressing themselves today in Washington's old clothers. If Washington were President now, he would have to learn our ways or lose the next election. Only fools and theorists imagine that our society can be handled with gloves or long poles. One must make one's self a part of it. If

⁶⁶Democracy, p. 78.

⁶⁷Democracy, p. 80.

virtue won't answer our purpose, we must use vice, or our opponents will put us out of office, and this was as true in Washington's day as it is now, and always will be."⁶⁸

These comments functioned in two important ways. First they reached backwards to an earlier observation of Carrington's that he could not help regretting the loss of "whatever it was that produced George Washington, and a crowd of other men like him. But [he went on to say] I think we might produce the men still if we had the same field for them."⁶⁹ The problem was, Adams seemed to be saying, that politics no longer offered opportunities to men of integrity. Ratcliffe's words also reached forward to foreshadow his defence in the final chapter of the novel. There, when Mrs. Lee told him she knew of the bribe he had accepted, Ratcliffe attempted to absolve his guilt by claiming never to have touched the money personally. It had been paid to the party's national committee to cover debts that might have prevented the party's success in future elections. His position was that he owed his highest loyalty to his political party and that what was good for the party was good for the nation. In his hypocrisy he did not explain to Mrs. Lee that the party debts had been incurred in maintaining his own incumbency in a close election. What Ratcliffe did say Adams made perfectly clear: Ratcliffe's highest loyalty

⁶⁸Democracy, p. 80.

⁶⁹Democracy, p. 75.

was to self and to the political party as it served that self.

At this point in the novel Adams' heroine, convinced of Ratcliffe's culpability, concluded her quest for the truth about democracy:

Not until this moment had she really felt as though she had got to the heart of politics, so that she could like a physician with his stethoscope, measure the organic disease. Now at last she knew why the pulse beat with such unhealthy irregularity and why men felt an anxiety which they could not or would not explain. . . . The audacity of the man would have seemed sublime if she had felt sure that he knew the difference between good and evil, between a lie and truth; but the more she saw of him, the surer she was that his courage was mere paralysis, and that he talked about virtue and vice as a man who is colorblind talks about red and green; he did not see them as she saw them; if left to choose for himself he would have nothing to guide him. Was it politics that had caused this atrophy of the moral senses by disuse?⁷⁰

Adams' answer to that final question was resounding yes. When men were not guided by a religious or political ideal beyond their own material welfare, they were corrupted by their own greed and lust for power. Part of the problem was due to human nature and part to an imbalance of powers between the executive and legislative branches of government. That imbalance continued because the Senate continued to garner power to itself as one weak President after another was elected.

In Democracy, Adams published his last public appeal for

⁷⁰Democracy, pp. 181-82.

political reform. The wider reading public he addressed in the novel was shown that it needed not just to elect better officials, but to improve itself. The idea that the government could not be reformed without reforming the people was expressed (with Adams' characteristic irony) by the villain of the piece:

. . . no representative government can long be much better than the society it represents. Purify society and you purify government.⁷¹

Presidents and senators were, after all, men of the people.

When Adams returned to the subject of his experience with reform politics in The Education, he reiterated the point he had made about senators in Democracy, but he transformed President Grant into a personal symbol for the incomprehensible forces of nature.

Focusing on the persona's expectation of the famous general who became President, Adams echoed Democracy by drawing a parallel between Grant and Washington. As they had both been soldiers, they represented order:

He might be as partisan as he pleased, but a general who had organized and commanded half a million or a million of men in the field, must know how to administer. Even Washington, who was, in education and experience, a mere cave dweller, had known how to organize a government, and had found Jeffersons

⁷¹Democracy, pp. 47-48.

and Hamiltons to organize his departments. The task of bringing the Government back to regular practices, and of restoring moral and mechanical order to administration, was not very difficult; it was ready to do it itself, with a little encouragement.⁷²

Grant, however, did not and could not restore order to civil government. The Senate waited along with Henry Adams for the attack of a reforming President, but the attack never came. Instead, "Grant avowed from the start a policy of drift."⁷³ This lack of moral direction on Grant's part became more significant for the persona Henry Adams than it had appeared to be to the reform journalist of 1869. To the latter it had seemed but a change in direction; to the former it became a failure of education, proof of "another total misconception of life--another inconceivable false start."⁷⁴

In examining the causes of his own failure to predict Grant's incompetence, Adams concluded that nothing in his education or experience had prepared him for Grant. The young Adams had met but one man of a similar type before in 1869, and that had been Garibaldi. His study of the most modern evolutionary thought of the day had indicated that Grant "had no right to exist" because he "should have been extinct for

⁷²Education, p. 260.

⁷³Education, p. 267.

⁷⁴Education, p. 262.

years."⁷⁵ He was a "pre-intellectual, archaic" type in whom "intellect counted for nothing; only energy counted."⁷⁶ Adams later

. . . came to recognize the type in other men, with differences and variations, as normal; men whose energies were the greater, the less they wasted on thought; men who sprang from the soil to power; apt to be distrustful of themselves and of others; shy; jealous; sometimes vindictive; more or less dull in outward appearance; always needing stimulants, but for whom action was the highest stimulant--the instinct of fight. Such men were forces of nature, energies of the prime, like the Pteraspic, ...⁷⁷

The lesson that Henry Adams finally learned from Grant's presidency was that drifting political power such as Grant symbolized gathered energy to itself that its source--Grant and men like him--was powerless to control.⁷⁸ Whether he liked it or not, whether he used it or not, whether he guided it or not, a President had power. And if he were too weak or too stupid a man to direct it, that power would act randomly and chaos should rule.

⁷⁵Education, p. 266.

⁷⁶Education, p. 265.

⁷⁷Education, p. 265.

⁷⁸R. P. Blackmur, Henry Adams (New York: Harcourt, 1980), p. 82.

CHAPTER IV

HARBINGERS OF DISASTER: JAMES A. GARFIELD, GROVER CLEVELAND, WILLIAM McKINLEY AND THEODORE ROOSEVELT

After the publication of Democracy, Henry Adams apparently gave up his serious attempts to bring about general political reform, and for the next twenty-two years he published no further comments on the contemporary American political scene. But his interest in Washington intrigues and in the "wolves in sheep's clothing" and the "asses in lions' skins" who called themselves public servants continued unabated until his wife's death in 1885.¹ During those first five years Adams' attention was increasingly occupied in the writing of his multi-volume history, but many of his friends and acquaintances remained actively involved in politics, and Adams could not refrain from uttering his opinions, nor from trying to make his influence felt.

The first President elected during those years might have been expected to please Adams. He and James A. Garfield had first met at the close of the Civil War when Garfield visited the American Legation in London. Since then the two men had maintained a fairly cordial acquaintance through their mutual interest in reform issues. First as a congressman and later as House speaker, Garfield had been one of the major voices

¹Democracy, p. 182.

for reform in Congress. As a journalist Adams had both sought information from Garfield and attempted to aid him. When, for example, Garfield--as chairman of the House Committee on Currency and Banking--investigated the New York gold panic of September 24, 1869, he asked Adams and his brother Charles Francis Adams, Jr., for advice. Already at work on his article on the gold conspiracy, Adams was happy to respond; because he was eventually privy to Garfield's findings and thoughts on the subject, Adams went as far as he did in suggesting in that article that the scandal reached as high as President Grant's intimate circle.² Adams was quick to recognize Garfield's political promise and accordingly advised his brother when the occasion arose to "get ready to help him [with information on railway schedules], for he may help you someday. We may never come up, but he probably will swim pretty strong."³

Once Adams returned to Harvard to edit the North American Review, he remained in touch with Garfield, asking him to write articles on reform or to suggest others who might. And Garfield did get on swimmingly in Washington, becoming House speaker, then senator, and eventually President. But by that time Adams had reason to fear that Garfield's administration might prove as inept and corrupt as its predecessors. He did

²Samuels I, p. 198.

³22 June 1869, Ford, Letters I, p. 163.

approve Garfield's candidacy, and he even wrote his friend Lodge with relative optimism:

Our fight is now pretty well won. Grantism, which drove us to rebellion, is dead. Not a vestige of it is left. One after another every finger of that octopus has been lopped off. The government is now running on a new track, not much better to be sure but free from organized corruption. There will be rotten places here, as there were with Hayes--more and worse, I fear--but, as with him, on the whole we may rest and be thankful.⁴

Two things about Garfield himself, however, led Adams to somewhat gloomier expectations. Garfield, whose personal integrity was thought to be high, was found to be one of those congressmen who had bought cut-rate stock in a Credit Mobilier deal which left him looking as if he might have accepted a bribe. A second disillusionment for Adams lay in the facts surrounding Garfield's party nomination as a compromise candidate for a seemingly deadlocked convention. In his ambition, Garfield had agreed to accept Chester A. Arthur as a running-mate, a man Adams thought represented one of the most corrupt elements in the Republican party machine; and he contracted, at the same time, a political debt to James G. Blaine, Adams' anathema.⁵

⁴21 May 1881, Ford, Letters I, p. 329.

⁵Samuels II, pp. 417-48; "To Henry Cabot Lodge," 29 October 1881, Ford, Letters I, p. 330; "To Henry Cabot Lodge," 15 November 1881, Ford, Letters I, p. 331; "To John Hay," 26 November 1882, Ford, Letters I, pp. 342-43.

When Garfield appointed Blaine as his Secretary of State, Adams was so disgusted he gave up his desk at the State Department where he had been doing research for his History and made grumbling complaints to such friends as John Hay and Henry Cabot Lodge who were closely involved in Republican politics. On the very day Blaine left office, Adams resumed his research and his desk at the State Department.⁶

When Garfield was shot after less than four months in office Adams' response seemed curiously unfeeling. The only record of that response was written in a letter to Adams' friend and Garfield's attorney general, Issac Wayne MacVeagh, shortly after the shooting:

As for the poor President, let us consider it as a fever, like his wife's; or let us suppose that a brick fell on him from a housetop Practically this is what has happened. He has been hit by one of the disregarded chances of life. What then?

Of course your business is to get him well. In that case he will have an eight-year, popular, irresistible administration. Today is a week since he was hit, and if he could live a week, I know not why he should not live a thousand.

If not! Well! We will face the alternative when it comes. Nothing can shake society with us, now slavery is gone. As long as Mr. Arthur gives me my right . . .

⁶"To Edwin Lawrence Godkin," 13 December 1881, Cater, p. 119; "To Charles Milnes Gaskell," 29 January 1882, Ford, Letters I, p. 333. For more about Adams' quarrel with Blaine see also pages 252, 281 and 334 in Ward Theron's edition of The Letters of Mrs. Henry Adams 1865-1883 (Boston: Little, 1936).

I will not speak harshly of his virtuous administration.⁷

MacVeagh was not such an intimate friend that Adams would have chosen to express personal grief to him had he felt any, and so the bantering tone. Generally, Adams chose not to write of personal loss, especially to his male friends. When he did write to close friends who had lost people they loved, his expressions of sympathy were both delicate and sincere. Yet the deaths of three presidents by assassination during his lifetime apparently called forth no such expressions. Whether he deemed an expression of his personal feelings unnecessary or whether he was simply unmoved cannot now be known.

Shortly after Arthur became President on September 20th, Adams wrote Edwin L. Godkin of the Nation that he was considerably relieved to think that James G. Blaine had lost power:

Between ourselves, my devil was Mr. Blaine. I shall be so well pleased to bid him good-bye that for a time I shan't mind any new devils. Garfield's administration so far as it went, was [a] sort of delirium tremens vision with Blaine as the big and active snake. As I conceive, it will be no small relief to welcome a variety of small green and parti-colored serpents in place of this single reptile.⁸

⁷Cater, p. 108.

⁸30 September 1881, Cater, pp. 115-16.

Beneath the bantering tone and the patronizing attitude, however, Adams was still genuinely concerned with reform, and he feared that Arthur's connections with machine politics would make his administration "the centre for every element of corruption, south and north."⁹ Hence he offered to invest \$20,000 in a silent partnership with Godkin and others in the purchase of the New York Evening Post as a voice of reform. Adams' old reform ally Carl Schurz was made editor-in-chief. At Adams' suggestion the Post gave Arthur public support at the same time it attempted to bring pressures to bear on the administration, but it was not as successful as Adams desired it to be, nor was Adams' advice heeded to the extent he had hoped for. Although President Arthur surprised many by turning his back on his former ties with the Republican party machine and by supporting certain reform legislation (such as the Pendleton Civil Service Reform Bill which established the merit system in the federal government), Adams never indicated that he thought Chester Arthur quite adequate to his office, and he never hesitated to belittle Arthur's social aspirations.

His primary complaint against Arthur had been what he saw as Arthur's low moral standards, so his main interest in the election of 1884 was not so much who was elected as who was not. He was opposed to both Republican front-runners (Arthur and Blaine); thus he began to speak more and more frequently

⁹Ford, Letters I, p. 331.

in his letters of his desire to support a Democratic candidate. Once the Republicans nominated Blaine, many of the leaders of the reform element within the party (Roger Wolcott, George William Curtis, and Carl Schurz) apparently sympathized with Adams' view and invited the Democrats to put forward a strong candidate so the Mugwumps could vote with them. When Adams took to calling himself a "good Democrat," he was only half jesting as he actually agreed with the Democrats' position on a number of issues, particularly that of the need to lower protective tariffs. He found the campaign itself a source of amusement, and his correspondence of the period is filled with that irreverent humor that makes his letters delightful reading to this day. To John Hay, a loyal supporter of the Republican party, he wrote on 3 August 1884:

As a good Democrat, I hope that if you're going to elect Mr. Blaine you will do it quickly and thoroughly, for I am tired of my independent friends, who are too good to vote for Blaine, and never, no never, would vote with the wicked Democrats. The amount I hear of this tom-foolery is calculated to make a tortoise-shell cat turn green. One would suppose that this country had never till now elected any president except G. Washington. Dear, dear, dear! How their grandfathers did squeal about T. Jefferson!¹⁰

Once Grover Cleveland was elected, Adams did not anticipate

¹⁰Ford, Letters I, pp. 359-60.

that his own life would change very much, as he expected a number of his friends to move into positions of power, and he considered the new President to be "a very honest, hard-working man, with plenty of courage and common-sense." But he also expected Cleveland "to make mistakes" because he had had "little experience" and because his party was so "ragged, timid and stupid" it could hardly give him the support he would need.¹¹

Despite those relatively optimistic words, Adams was shortly disillusioned with Cleveland. Within two weeks of Adams' remark about Cleveland's making mistakes, he made what was in Adams' eyes an enormous one--he appointed Daniel Manning of New York as Secretary of the Treasury. Adams was particularly offended when the Evening Post chose to support the appointment. He complained to Godkin that the appointment of the "spoilsman" to "the controlling political office"¹² damaged the President "in the eyes of the country" and shook his own "personal confidence in Mr. Cleveland's honesty or good sense."¹³ While he did not want to suggest that the Evening Post "denounce" Cleveland, he warned Godkin that "it

¹¹"To Charles Milnes Gaskell," 8 February 1885, Ford, Letters I, p. 362.

¹²27 February 1885, Cater, p. 139.

¹³25 February 1885, Cater, p. 138.

is one thing to use them as allies, and another to let ourselves be used."¹⁴

Whether Godkin's recalcitrance would have influenced Adams to give up his efforts to exert political influence over the next few years is questionable, but in March 1885 a personal crisis began for Henry Adams that destroyed his practical interest in politics for some time. His grief at his wife's death affected him to such an extent that even the election of Benjamin Harrison in 1888, three years after his wife's suicide, failed to rouse Adams from his torpor. During that election year Adams continued his habit of the past several years of traveling widely. First he went to Cuba in March and then toured the Far West in October and November with an English friend of his youth, Sir Robert Cunliffe. Shortly after returning to Washington, he learned of the disreputable "deals" that had been involved in the election, but he did little more than despair to Cunliffe that "politics have been the single uncompensated disappointment of life--pure waste of energy and moral."¹⁵

Adams was out of the country during most of Harrison's administration, but he returned from his around-the-world tour

¹⁴27 February 1885, Cater, p. 139.

¹⁵Ernest Samuels, Henry Adams: The Major Phase (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1964) p. 2. Hereafter cited as Samuels III.

with John La Farge just in time for the re-election of Grover Cleveland. By 1893 the rising political fortunes of some of his closest friends and serious changes in the world economic situation brought American politics once again to his concerned attention. With a tone more acrimonious than it had previously been, Adams called Cleveland a "stuffed prophet" who had held out false promises and proven himself a mere opportunist.¹⁶

The financial panic of 1893 and the debates in Congress and elsewhere over whether the country should remain on the gold standard (despite the international scarcity of gold) or allow the free coinage of silver (as western and agricultural interests desired) caused Adams once more "to plunge into a bath of boiling politics."¹⁷ Criticizing seriously and scoffing at the same time, he complained to John Hay in September that the situation was boring him to death as it drove him to insanity:

The newspapers are madder and more driveling than ever before. They bore me to frenzy with their eternal clack about the Sherman Act. The single lofty figure of noble sanity is that of Grover; but as I happen not to be sane, but to disagree with him on every possible point, and as the Democratic party is also sane

¹⁶"To John Hay," 18 June 1892, Ford, Letters II, p. 12.

¹⁷"To John Hay," 18 October 1893, Cater, p. 293.

and disagrees with him, he has no true admirers and supporters except the two Republican senators from Massachusetts, who vote for him and run his machine in exchange for their own exclusive advantage. [This remark was a criticism of his former student Henry Cabot Lodge.] I do not know what Grover's politics are, but if he leaves behind him any toe-nail of the Democratic party he will have to be quick and work hard 18

The next week Adams wrote Hay that Cleveland had indeed "smashed" his own party by his actions and that he would be "pretty well smashed in return" come the next election.¹⁹ What seemed to bother Adams most was that he had earlier given up hope of the Republicans' setting the country back on the right track, and what he saw in the failure of the Democrats was that his "dear democracy" was "all in pieces" with "not a rag of decency left."²⁰ Concluding that Cleveland, "our fat-headed sculpin who thinks he rules us," was himself "ruled by a pack of howling liars and thieves on the stock exchange," Adams wrote his English friend Charles Milnes Gaskell that he no longer cared what happened to "governments or societies."²¹

Typically, Adams overstated the effects of his disgust. In the winter of 1893-94 he claimed that Washington had become

¹⁸ 21 September 1893, Cater, pp. 289-90.

¹⁹ 28 September 1893, Cater, p. 291.

²⁰ Cater, p. 293.

²¹ 26 November 1893, Ford, Letters II, pp. 33-34.

too noisy, that he had given up his belief in reform, and that even "his Imperial Highness by God's Grace Grover the First" was no longer amusing.²² At the very same time he was planning and carrying out his third visit to Cuba and becoming involved with his friend William Hallett Phillips, a young lawyer in the State Department, in Cuban political affairs. According to Adams' biographer Ernest Samuels, Adams and Phillips were actively involved in an "astonishing international conspiracy" to liberate Cuba from Spanish rule.²³ Adams' role in the conspiracy involved financial and moral support of the cause. He met with Cuban revolutionaries both in Cuba and at home in Washington; he allowed meetings to be held in his own home; he exerted what influence he had by proselytizing among his politically powerful acquaintances, where he was particularly successful with Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, Theodore Roosevelt, and Senator Don Cameron; and he took upon himself the responsibility of instructing the Cuban leaders he met in the intricacies of international finance.²⁴ President Cleveland's neutrality proclamation on the Cuban situation did not quell Adams' activities, but it did give Adams reason for one more complaint.

²²"To Mabel Hooper LaFarge," 17 December 1893, Cater, p. 298.

²³Samuels III, p. 157.

²⁴Samuels III, p. 164.

Adams' dissatisfaction with the Cleveland Administration was further compounded when Cleveland used the army to back the Pullman workers' strike in Chicago. Writing Elizabeth Cameron, a dear friend and the wife of Senator Don Cameron, Adams lamented that "the wage-question" was "as good as settled" because "the gold-bug has drunk blood, and has seen that the government can safely use the army to shoot socialists."²⁵ For Adams, Cleveland thus joined George M. Pullman and Andrew Carnegie to become "our Crassus and Pompey and Caesar,--our proud American triumvirate, the types of our national mind and ideals."²⁶

During the final two years of Cleveland's Administration, Adams' letters continued to criticize Cleveland's economic, domestic, and foreign policies for their lack of intelligence, direction and consistency. His tone was increasingly shrill and hysterical as he lambasted bankers and other "gold'bugs" for their cupidity, the President for his "hog-like attitudes of indifference," and the Congress for being "as disorganized, stupid, and childlike as ever!"²⁷ At the same time Adams began to theorize on a subject he had hinted at in the History and would develop more fully in later books: what were the

²⁵13 July 1894, Letters II, p. 52.

²⁶Letters II, p. 53.

²⁷"To Brooks Adams," [Paris, September?] 1895, Ford, Letters II, p. 82.

forces that moved societies and how was the individual relevant? In the fall of 1895 he tentatively suggested to his brother Brooks an answer to the first part of that question:

The last six weeks have given me much to think about. Were we on the edge of a new and last great civilization, or of a first great movement of disintegration? There are facts on both sides; but my conclusion rather is--and this is what satiates my instinct for life--that our so-called civilization has shown its movement, even at the centre, arrested. It has failed to concentrate further. Its next effort may succeed, but it is more likely to be one of disintegration, with Russia for the eccentric on one side and America on the other.²⁸

And six months later, half seriously, he suggested an answer to the second. In the upcoming presidential election, Adams foresaw that William McKinley would be elected. He opposed McKinley because of his position on tariffs and hard money, yet he wrote Brooks that they should rejoice in McKinley's election:

My view of the case is always to encourage the big thieves and to force the pace. Let's get there quick! I'm for [J.P.] Morgan, McKinley and the trusts. They will bring us to ruin quicker than we could do it ourselves.²⁹

What Adams was suggesting was that the individual might hasten or retard the forces of nature, but he could not change them permanently. Exactly what directed those forces Adams did

²⁸Letters II, p. 82.

²⁹7 February 1896, Ford, Letters II, p. 97.

not or could not yet say, but he implied that the individual who was out of harmony with those forces at a given time could only wait for some sort of general collapse and a new beginning more sympathetic to his own ideal.

Disposed as he was by his nature and by the disappointments of his life to take the gloomiest possible view of the future, Henry Adams considered William McKinley the preferable candidate in 1896 simply because he was the lesser evil. Although he was out of the country during most of that election year, he carried on a lively, often teasing, correspondence with his many friends whose fortunes were still tied to the success or failure of the Republican party. To Elizabeth Cameron he wrote that he doubted whether McKinley would really do "much more mischief" than William Jennings Bryan, so he hoped McKinley would win at the same time he did all he could to help Bryan.³⁰ Actually, Adams did nothing more "to help" Bryan than write other Republican friends and tease--or torment them--with praise of the Democratic candidate. Even though he claimed, in effect, that it made no difference in the long run which man was elected, he did not seriously want Bryan to win, yet he did not like the McKinley supporters. So he complained, again to Mrs. Cameron: "if we allow the crushing intellectual imbecility of McKinley and his Ohio-Pennsylvania following to master us completely, you know the

³⁰ 27 July 1896, Ford, Letters II, p. 109.

type that will survive. . . . I am already stifled by it; what will happen when it alone exists in America!"³¹ To John Hay, an ardent McKinley supporter, Adams wrote while traveling in Germany:

Wayne [McVeagh] and I occupy most of the time very usefully in disputing. We both support the Major [McKinley], but I tell him his reasons are bad, and he tells me mine are idiotic. In such cases, both views are likely to be true; but as my reasons don't count, and I know I'm an idiot, the logic seems to me to be all on my side.³²

The idiotic views Adams referred to were those he espoused in his pose as "a pessimist and a fatalist, a populist, a communist, a socialist, and the friend of a humanist" who wished to hurry society along the road to disaster so that it might start all over again.³³ While he joked about supporting both men at the same time, Adams also expressed genuine concern about McKinley's not being equal to the job and about his ties to Wall Street and the "gold-bugs."

Adams' response to the election was as complicated a business as most things he chose to respond to. On one level

³¹4 August 1896, Ford, Letters II, p. 114.

³²24 August 1896, Cater, p. 379.

³³"To John Hay," 28 September 1893, Cater, p. 293. In later correspondence Adams seems to have shortened this catalogue of his ideology to "christian anarchist."

he teased his friends and wielded his sarcasm by pretending to support both candidates and neither. On a second level he offered serious advice to his Republican friends and fretted anxiously over the practical problems of getting the new administration to deal with the group's special interests (like the liberation of Cuba) in a satisfactory way. On yet another level, a seriously theoretical one, he also wrote, though not often and not to many. To his brother Brooks, who was intensely opposed to McKinley and the Wall Street interest, he wrote:

I do not believe it matters greatly who is President. A little sooner or a little later, all must follow the drift of human society. The sole interest I feel is that of ascertaining which way the drift is. . . . Therefore I would not have you pin your hopes on so pure a gamble as a Presidential candidate. Unless the usurers [who, he said, were poor politicians] develop some new force, which shall concentrate political society in a miraculous way, the present disintegration must go on.³⁴

Later in the summer he wrote to Elizabeth Cameron from Paris, reassuring her that he did not really expect the country to fall apart in the immediate future, but identifying at the time a constant source of future danger. As he saw it, the country's youth and that "great God of America--the Almighty Dollar" were at fault.³⁵ He ended, not uncharacteristically,

³⁴18 February 1896, Ford, Letters II, p. 100.

³⁵"To Elizabeth Cameron," 9 October 1896, Ford, Letters II, p. 117.

on a manic note, but that did not cancel out the seriousness that came before:

We have so little headway in America, that we may drop all to pieces without having even one thought or energy such as I want. A materialistic society like ours has no life except in materialistic success. Still I think that probably the instinct of cohesion and the one last surviving popular ideal of patriotism will save us from tumbling to pieces this time. If not the results of the tumble can hardly smash my kind of man flatter than the results of our material success did.

So there! If that be treason, make the most of it! Support McKinley--No!³⁶

By Election Day itself, the economic situation that had troubled Adams and his friends for nearly three years was easing up. Therefore when he wrote his English friend Gaskell of McKinley's election, he resumed his "I've-seen-it-all-before" tone. That letter also contained an interesting insight into Adams' often scornful attitude toward campaigning and pre-election activities:

The election has resulted as I supposed it would. . . . We have now a new administration to deal with, but an old situation, and I shall wait six months for affairs to settle themselves before I form any opinion about the future. Of course, elections settle nothing in themselves. They merely record public opinion, and, in this case, public opinion has little to do with the matter, which is controlled by conditions as general as the world itself.³⁷

³⁶4 August 1896, Ford, Letters II, p. 115.

³⁷16 November 1896, Ford, Letters II, p. 118.

In such letters as these, Adams was beginning to give tentative expression to ideas he developed more fully in The Education of Henry Adams, "The Rule of Phase Applied to History," and A Letter to American Teachers of History.

As word of McKinley's cabinet choices spread in the months between the election and the inauguration, Adams sputtered and fumed about the new administration's being "dust and ashes with a slight flavor of dishwater."³⁸ But his true interest was involved in working toward getting the United States to recognize Cuba's independence from Spain. To that end he wrote a report which Senator Don Cameron submitted to the Senate on December 21, 1896. Unhappily for Adams, his intimate involvement in Cuban affairs ended when his friend and co-conspirator William Hallett Phillips drowned in a boating accident in May, 1897. With Phillips' death and the retirement of Senator Cameron, Adams lost his primary access to power in Washington. So he turned his attention elsewhere--to John Hay.

Hay and Adams had been close personal friends for years. In their friendship, Adams had assumed the role of tutor to the young man, as he had to Brooks Adams, Henry Cabot Lodge and Theodore Roosevelt. But Hay was, as Ernest Samuels put it, "the chief graduate of his school of diplomacy at 1603

³⁸"To Mabel Hooper LaFarge," 25 January 1897, Cater, p. 395.

H Street."³⁹ When Hay was appointed first as ambassador to England and then as secretary of state, Adams channeled much of his energy toward helping Hay.

During the years of McKinley's first administration Adams was privy, through his relationship with Hay, to more real secrets of state than he had ever been before; but he considered the information he received from Hay in his capacity of confidant and advisor to be privileged communication, so he attempted to follow his own admonition that silence was "the only sensible form of expression."⁴⁰ Silence did not come easily, however. His letters of the period reflect his dissatisfactions on a personal level--he thought Hay was being both badly used and used up--and a political level--he and Hay resisted the new force of imperialism they felt at work in the government. Adams seemed unsure where to place the blame. At times he thought the problem was that McKinley was ineffective: "His constitutional incapacity to act," Adams wrote Elizabeth Cameron, "or to move at all except when floated by a stream, begins to reach imbecility."⁴¹ At such times Adams complained of the greed of the Senate: ". . . the President is the creature of the system, and its

³⁹Samuels III, p. 173.

⁴⁰"To Brooks Adams," 5 June 1895, Ford, Letters II, P. 70.

⁴¹19 February 1899, Ford, Letters II, p. 218.

agent, but I do not think he could change it if he would.

. . . The Senate is far more responsible for the system than the Executive is, and more obstinately hostile to administrative energy."⁴² At other times he saw a considerable force in McKinley, but not one he approved of: he described McKinley as a man of "suppleness and keenness of instinct," a "genius for manipulation," and "an uncommonly dangerous politician."⁴³ He was particularly alarmed by the terms of the treaty with Spain in which he saw proof that Congress had "abandoned" and McKinley had "betrayed" the "true American policy."⁴⁴ Through a favorable turn in the world economic situation and the military successes of the war with Spain, America had suddenly replaced England as banker and policeman to the world.⁴⁵ What Adams feared was McKinley's ambition, for as President under such circumstances he held "the sceptre of the world."⁴⁶

The turn of the century and the campaign of 1900 saw Adams' friends increasingly involved in dreams of empire and Adams himself increasingly gloomy in his isolationist position. Henry Cabot Lodge's voice was loud in the Senate as he struggled

⁴²22 December 1898, Cater, p. 454.

⁴³"To Elizabeth Cameron," Christmas 1898, Ford, Letters II, p. 201; 21 November 1898, p. 191; 4 December 1898, p. 195.

⁴⁴"To Brooks Adams," 11 June 1898, Ford, Letters II, p. 184.

⁴⁵Samuels III, p. 199.

⁴⁶"To John Hay," 5 May 1898, Ford, Letters II, p. 176.

to control both foreign policy and patronage. Theodore . Roosevelt, soon to be McKinley's new vice president, was scarcely less loud. Carried along were McKinley himself and John Hay, more out of necessity, perhaps, than inclination. Even Adams' younger brother Brooks was pleased with the new imperialistic stance. Henry Adams' despair with the situation and his role in it led him to see himself thus:

I have grown so used to playing the spider, and squatting in silence in the middle of the Washington web, and I have seen so many flies and other insects caught and devoured in its meshes, that I have now a little the sense of being a sort of ugly, bloated, purplish-blue, and highly venomous hairy tarantula which catches and devours Presidents, senators, diplomats, congressmen and cabinet-officers, and knows the flavor of every generation and every country in the civilized world. Just now my poor friend Hay is caught in the trap, and, to my infinite regret, I have to make a meal of him as of the rest. Very glad I shall be if he escapes alive, and my forebodings are dark; but he is no worse off than his predecessors except that he has a much bigger machine to run wrong.⁴⁷

In that mood he fled Washington, and in Paris he turned his attention away from politics and to the book that would in 1904 be published as Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres.

Between April, 1899, and mid-January, 1901, he spent only three months in the United States. He returned to Paris in late May, where he stayed through the new year.

⁴⁷"To Sir Robert Cunliffe," 19 January 1899, Ford, Letters II, pp. 204-5.

Even when his work on the cathedrals of twelfth-century France and the cult of the Virgin was finished and he had begun to write The Education, he spent no more than a few months of each year at home in Washington. Though his friends Hay, Lodge and Roosevelt ascended into the highest seats of power, he could not be induced to return too near the "boiling pot" of politics for too long. But he watched even from Paris, and he continued to make sometimes amusing, sometimes genuinely anxious, sometimes bitterly savage observations of their progress. Eventually, with more restraint and more subtle irony he would give them their places in The Education of Henry Adams, but before that he went through all the vacillations that events and his temperament dictated.

Although he complained that McKinley's first administration had accomplished nothing--Hay included--Adams knew that the country's growing prosperity would keep the Republicans in office. What interested him more than the upcoming campaign was the combination of that prosperity with recent technological developments: he became convinced that a new age was beginning where energy rather than money would be the main concern.⁴⁸ He wondered how that energy would be, could be controlled. His discovery of the dynamo at the Paris Exposition of 1899-1900 both interested and alarmed him. Years

⁴⁸Samuels III, p. 247.

earlier, upon hearing of the battle between the Monitor and the Merrimac, he had predicted that science would lead men to create inventions they could not control. He had feared then that eventually the human race might "commit suicide by blowing up the world."⁴⁹ The dynamo seemed a fulfillment of that prediction.⁵⁰ For Adams, it symbolized the new forces that science and industry had set to work in society. Not able to understand these forces himself, he wondered if anyone else did. Suspecting that others knew no more than he, he predicted that ignorance could lead to disaster: "We know so little," he wrote his brother Brooks, "and our power is so great!"⁵¹

Word of McKinley's assassination in 1901 reached Adams while he was touring Scandinavia. His reaction to this, the third assassination of a President during his lifetime, was somewhat less enigmatic than his reaction to Garfield's death had been, but no more sympathetic. Before he knew the President's wounds to be fatal, he wrote his friend and McKinley's secretary of state, John Hay:

⁴⁹"To Charles Francis Adams, Jr.," 11 April 1862, Ford, Cycle I, p. 135.

⁵⁰Samuels III, p. 234.

⁵¹7 May 1901, Cater, p. 508.

We have been fed so full of horrors that a mere political murder seems now a regular part of our lives. I do not yet know how serious the case is, but I take it for granted it is very bad, and I am much troubled by it.⁵²

But his concern in this instance was for his friends in McKinley's administration and for the welfare of the country, as he made clear in a letter to Senator Cameron's wife Elizabeth written two weeks later and in a considerably different tone:

Your fears that I might be affected by losing poor dear old McKinley show a susceptible heart, not in me but in you. The Major was a person as completely outside my personality as any of his recent predecessors. His methods were as bad as possible. His function was that of a very supple and highly paid agent of the crudest capitalism. To do him justice, he served industrial capital rather than the Jews, but he would have served it in any form, consciously or unconsciously, if the times had with us reached that stage. To murder him was a gross absurdity that makes me despair of anarchy. The true person to kill was Hanna,--the senator!⁵³

Not for Adams the sentimental or the decorous pretense! He could not condone the act, but he had indeed, as he was wont to say, seen it all before. His interest was centered in his friends' new situation--in John Hay's ailing health and in "Teddy's luck!"⁵⁴

⁵²7 September 1901, Ford, Letters II, p. 350.

⁵³28 September 1901, Ford, Letters II, p. 356.

⁵⁴Ford, Letters II, p. 350.

At the time Theodore Roosevelt became President, Adams had known him for about a dozen years, ever since he had come to Washington in the administration of Benjamin Harrison. The Roosevelts became part of Adams' social circle, which included the Hays and the Lodges among its primary political families. Adams was particularly fond of Mrs. Lodge and Mrs. Roosevelt; but he had considerably less respect for their husbands than for John Hay, and considerably less affection as well. Still, through the years he had attempted to educate all three men according to his own ideal of political behavior. Neither Lodge nor Roosevelt came as close as Hay to embodying that ideal. Nevertheless, though he might complain that he was "afraid to go home and get kicked by my triumvirate of friends," he was pleased to have them "running our foreign affairs . . . in my house at the cost of my comfort."⁵⁵

At the beginning Adams had not taken Roosevelt very seriously. During those early years in Washington, first as a civil service commissioner and later as assistant secretary of the navy, Roosevelt had dined frequently with the Hays and Adams and been teased by them about his boyish optimism and self-confidence.⁵⁶ (Adams patronizingly

⁵⁵"To Charles Milnes Gaskell," 16 November 1901, Ford, Letters II, p. 360.

⁵⁶Samuels III, p. 96.

referred to him in letters as "our Teddy" and "our child and pupil.")⁵⁷ At their dinner tables, where William Hallett Phillips was also a frequent guest, Roosevelt heard much sympathetic talk about Cuban independence and the tyranny of Spain. Perhaps that talk did influence Roosevelt, as Adams' biographer has suggested, to prevent "interference with the flow of arms" to Cuba and to allow Phillips "a freer hand" in trying to get official recognition for the cause of the Cuban revolutionaries.⁵⁸ Despite Adams' sincere efforts on behalf of Cuban independence, he felt that Roosevelt went too far when he resigned his position with the navy to raise his Rough Riders. His behavior occasioned--and not for the last time--Adams' query: "Is he quite mad?"⁵⁹

Once Roosevelt returned as a hero of the Spanish-American War, Adams claimed to be amused by his political aspirations, but he clearly did not approve of them. What bothered Adams was the fact that, as he saw it, "Teddy is [too] ready to fight. . . . [and] is too much of a plunger and too little serious."⁶⁰ Roosevelt's temper continued to be a source of

⁵⁷"To Elizabeth Cameron," 29 July 1894, Ford, Letters II, p. 54; "To Elizabeth Cameron," 23 February 1902, Ford, Letters II, p. 374.

⁵⁸Samuels III, p. 173.

⁵⁹"To Elizabeth Cameron," 5 March 1899, Ford, Letters II, p. 225.

⁶⁰"To Elizabeth Cameron," 5 March 1899, Ford, Letters II, p. 225.

worry after McKinley's death. Adams wished his young friend success in his new office, but with predictable pessimism he did not expect it. Warning his brother Brooks (who did expect Roosevelt to do great things) that McKinley's success--to the degree that he had had any--had been due to his "method of inexhaustible patience and good humor," Adams complained that Roosevelt's temper was "canny and practical, but at all times sudden and hazardous."⁶¹

Upon returning to Washington in the early winter of 1902, Adams found himself still included in the Roosevelts' social circle, despite their move to the White House. Because Hay had agreed to stay on as Roosevelt's secretary of state, Adams came to have even closer access to men in power than he had had before, but his personal feelings for the two men and his growing disapproval of their foreign policy led to his being less actively involved in the government than he had been when strangers and political enemies had been in power. In that irony he saw new support for his old claim that a friend in power was a friend lost.

There were other qualities of Roosevelt's besides his temper that gave Adams reason for concern. The most important of these was the very quality Adams had so often lamented the absence of in other presidents--energy! On a social

⁶¹3 November 1901, Ford, Letters II, p. 359-60.

level, this energy led to behavior that both annoyed and amused Adams. After his first dinner party at the White House, he complained:

. . . as usual Theodore absorbed the conversation, and if he tried me ten years ago, he crushes me now. . . . Really Theodore is exasperating even to me, and always was. His want of tact hurts Congressmen and Senators more than it does me, but what annoys me is his childlike and infantile superficiality with his boyish dogmatism of assertion. He lectures me on history as though he were a high-school pedagogue. Of course I fall back instantly on my favorite protective pose of ignorance, which aggravates his assertions, and so we drift steadily apart.⁶²

Many times Adams still claimed to find Roosevelt politically amusing as well, as when he wrote Elizabeth Cameron that the President's "flirtation" with the Kaiser was "delicious."⁶³ But more often than not, his letters reflected irritation with Roosevelt for being immature, for acting precipitantly, and for wanting to change everything at once.

Lying at the root of Roosevelt's behavior, Adams thought, were the twin flaws of ambition and vanity. Politically, Roosevelt made mistakes in his own party because he was "openly and shamelessly devoted to his own interests, like

⁶²"To Elizabeth Cameron," 12 January 1902, Ford, Letters II, p. 366.

⁶³"To Elizabeth Cameron," 26 January 1902, Ford, Letters II, p. 370.

a big school-boy, blundering all over the place."⁶⁴ On matters of domestic policy, he behaved "like a boarding-house bully."⁶⁵ He did not even consult his Cabinet, Adams complained, before he "hit Pierpont Morgan, the whole railway interest, and the whole Wall Street connection, a tremendous whack on the nose." The problem was not on this occasion that he had indeed taken a swing at the truly "wicked," but that he had done so without consulting other members of the government and that he tended to "hit everybody impartially over the head, absolutely without need, and against the entreaties of his friends."⁶⁶ In other domestic matters Adams also found fault. He complained of unpaved roads, unbuilt docks and a general lack of revenues for internal improvements. To his mind Roosevelt had made as many mistakes as he would have thought "rational in a cowboy," and the only thing saving the Republican party from ruin at the ballot box was the general helplessness of the Democrats.⁶⁷

Roosevelt's foreign policy elicited even stronger censure.

⁶⁴"To Elizabeth Cameron," 20 April 1902, Ford, Letters II, p. 387.

⁶⁵"To Elizabeth Cameron," 12 April 1903, Ford, Letters II, p. 404.

⁶⁶"To Elizabeth Cameron," 23 February 1902, Ford, Letters II, p. 374.

⁶⁷"To Brooks Adams," 8 March 1903, Cater, p. 538.

Adams did not praise Roosevelt's bellicosity over the Monroe Doctrine any more than he did Roosevelt's behavior in the boundary dispute between Alaska and Canada. There, Adams reported, "Theodore roars like a Texas steer, and ramps round the ring screaming for instant war, and ordering a million men instantly to arms."⁶⁸ Roosevelt's intervention in Venezuelan affairs and those of Santa Domingo were, to Adams' mind, part of the same American expansionist ambitions as the plans for an Isthmian canal and the annexation of the Philippines. Adams opposed such imperial designs, and he thought that Roosevelt's support of them grew out of his vanity rather than his intelligence. Mockingly, he wrote of Roosevelt as "Our Emperor," "Pontifex Maximus," "Titanic Theodore," "Kaiser Theodorus," and "a sort of Moses and Messiah."⁶⁹ Despairing, he said that "the President had not a notion what he was doing. Cleveland was perhaps drunk, as the story goes; but Theodore is never sober, only he is drunk with himself and not with rum."⁷⁰

⁶⁸"To Elizabeth Cameron," 1 March 1903, Ford, Letters II, p. 399.

⁶⁹"To Elizabeth Cameron," 25 January 1903, Ford, Letters II, p. 394; "To Margaret Chandler, 1 September 1905, Cater, p. 574; "To Margaret Chanler," 27 August 1908, Cater, p. 619; "To Elizabeth Cameron," 12 May 1910, Ford, Letters II, p. 539; "To Elizabeth Cameron," 25 February 1912, Ford, Letters II, p. 586.

⁷⁰"To Elizabeth Cameron," 23 February 1902, Ford, Letters II, p. 395.

During the campaign year of 1904, Adams' attention was on other matters than his "neighbor Roosevelt, [who was] a terrible bore, owing to his absorption in cheap Politics," for that year he published Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres.⁷¹ But he did remark to Elizabeth Cameron that he was "interested in watching" Roosevelt's "state of mind" because it made "clearer some very interesting characters of history."⁷² This comment reflected Adams' continuing interest in political figures as representative historical types. Earlier the preceding year, in a letter to his young friend George Cabot Lodge, Adams had obviously had Roosevelt as well as himself in mind as the model of the typical American man:

The American man is one-sided to deformity and yet extraordinarily conceited, as far as literature reveals him. The American woman flatters him and rules him. He likes to be ruled. He is a helpless, domestic animal, fond of baby talk. I like him, for he is helpless and sympathetic; afraid of himself, of his women, of his children; yearning for love and doughnuts; shocked at automobiles and Trusts; proud and puffed up at riding a horse and shooting a bear; he is a gentleman whom I know well; in fact, though it is not anything I boast of, I was once an American man myself.⁷³

⁷¹"To Charles Milnes Gaskell," 27 April 1904, Ford, Letters II, p. 433.

⁷²13 March 1904, Ford, Letters II, p. 428.

⁷³27 April 1903, Cater, pp. 544-45.

What distinguished Roosevelt was the office he held and his personal energy (which Adams equated with "Teddy's luck"). As a result of his interest in the nature and consequence of that energy as it manifested itself from a position of power, Adams transformed Roosevelt into a personification of the dynamo at work in the social and political spheres--an extraordinary force that could not be channeled "to use for a vital purpose."⁷⁴

In 1905, the year of Roosevelt's second inauguration and Hay's death, Adams began to write The Education. Slightly more than half the book dealt with the persona Henry Adams' "education," particularly his political education, up to the year 1871. At that point, "[f]it or unfit, Henry Adams stopped his own education . . . and began to apply it for practical uses, like his neighbors. At the end of twenty years, he found that he had finished, and could sum up the result."⁷⁵ Because the narration resumed in 1892, the administrations of Garfield, Arthur, and Harrison, along with the first administration of Cleveland, were simply not discussed. Nor did Adams' reform efforts during those missing

⁷⁴Blackmur, p. 258. In his Symbol and Idea in Henry Adams, Melvin Lyon considers Roosevelt to be Adams' symbol for the failed Savior (p. 168).

⁷⁵Education, pp. 314-15.

years receive the slightest mention. The book was not after all, despite Henry Cabot Lodge's editorial addition, an autobiography. Adams as author chose to manipulate events in the interest of form and theme, just as he let the voice of memory speak more truthfully than mere facts could.

The lessons he remembered learning in his political education prior to 1871 held true thereafter--though the development of what he saw as a new force in society around the year 1900 did have one last lesson to teach. What he had learned, in retrospect, was that while the eighteenth-century ideal of the amateur statesman may have produced American democratic government, American democracy produced the machine politician. Such men as George Washington, Albert Gallatin, and his own Adams forebears had had qualities of character and training which allowed them to govern in accordance with moral law, enlightened reason, and the Constitution. They guided public opinion and for a time at least appeared to "impose their will on history."⁷⁶ Their success was limited by flaws in their own characters, by flaws in the political system--namely the power of the Senate to enervate the Executive, and by forces of circumstance. In the nineteenth century an economic age replaced the preceding

⁷⁶J. C. Levenson, "Henry Adams and the Art of Politics," Southern Review, NS 4 (Winter 1968), 53.

political age as the American abandoned Jeffersonian ideals and became increasingly materialistic. As Adams explained it in The Education.

The American mind had less respect for money than the European or Asiatic mind, and bore its loss more easily; but it had been deflected by its pursuit till it could turn in no other direction. It shunned, distrusted, disliked, the dangerous attraction of ideals ⁷⁷

The absence of guiding ideals and the growth of political patronage struggles made it increasingly difficult for men of character to get into positions of political power or to maintain their integrity once in power: Adams himself served as an example of the truth of the first and Charles Sumner of the second assertion.

The only cure Adams had been able to see for political corruption was individual morality, but he qualified even that solution by saying that "a situation is always stronger than a man's will."⁷⁸ The corruption that grew out of the patronage struggles between the Senate and the Executive contaminated all those who supported political parties and only those who toed the party line got into or remained in positions of power. Addressing his former student Henry Cabot

⁷⁷Education, p. 328.

⁷⁸"To Elizabeth Cameron," 5 February 1899, Ford, Letters II, p. 214.

Lodge on this problem just after the young Lodge had lost his contest for a seat in the state senate, Adams advised him not to pursue a political career any further:

This is one of the draw-backs to politics as a pursuit. I suppose every man who has looked at the game has been struck by the remarkable way in which politics deteriorate the moral tone of everybody who mixes in them. The deterioration is far more marked than in any other occupation I know of except the turf, stock-jobbing, and gambling. I imagine the reason in each case to be the same. It is the curse of politics that what one man gains, another man loses. On such conditions you can create not even an average morality. Politicians as a class must be as mean as card-sharpers, turf-men, or Wall Street curbstone operators. . . . I have never known a young man go into politics who was not the worse for it. I could give a list as long as the Athenaeum Catalogue, from my two brothers, John and Brooks, down to Willy Astor They all try to be honest, and then are tripped up by the dishonest; or they try to be dishonest (i.e., practical politicians) and degrade their own natures. In the first case they become disappointed and bitter; in the other they lose self-respect. My conclusion is that no man should be in politics unless he would honestly rather not be there. Public service should be a corvée; a disagreeable necessity. The satisfaction should consist in getting out of it.⁷⁹

Lodge did not take Adams' advice, and in choosing to become a professional politician he forfeited much of his former teacher's affection and respect. It must surely have been a final chastisement when Adams chose to present Lodge as

⁷⁹ 15 November 1881, Ford, Letters I, p. 331.

the symbolic successor of Charles Sumner in The Education and as the embodiment of the failure of the education given to men like himself as part of their New England, ruling-class heritage. Speaking of his relationship with Lodge in The Education, Adams wrote:

With Lodge himself, as scholar, fellow instructor, co-editor of the North American Review, and political reformer from 1873 to 1878, he [Adams] had worked intimately, but with him afterwards as politician he had not much relation; and since Lodge had suffered what Adams thought the misfortune of becoming not only a Senator but a Senator from Massachusetts--a singular social relation which Adams had known only as fatal to friends--a superstitious student, intimate with the laws of historical fatality, would rather have recognized him only as an enemy Senators can never be approached with safety 80

But Adams gave Lodge a deeper significance than that of representing the American senator as the political problem-child of the Constitution. Lodge represented--in a clearer way than Carrington did in Democracy--that failure of education to prepare men of good intentions to meet the realities of governance in the latter half of the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries. Lodge's failure was the product of a conflict between theory and practice:

As a type for study or a standard for education, Lodge was a creature

⁸⁰ Education, pp. 353-54.

of teaching--Boston incarnate--the child of local parentage; and while his ambition led him to be more, the intent, though virtuous, was--as Adams admitted in his own case--restless. An excellent talker a voracious reader, a ready wit, an accomplished orator, with a clear mind and a powerful memory he could never feel perfectly at ease whatever leg he stood on, and shifted, sometimes with a painful strain of temper, from one sensitive muscle to another, uncertain whether to pose as an uncompromising Yankee; or a pure American; or a patriot in the still purer atmosphere of Irish, German, or Jews; or a scholar and historian of Harvard College. . . . standing first on the social, then on the political foot; now worshipping, now banning; shocked by the wanton display of immorality, but practising the license of political usage; sometimes bitter, often genial, always intelligent,--Lodge had the singular merit of interesting. The usual statesmen [intent only on personal gain] flocked in swarms like crows, black and monotonous. Lodge's plumage was varied, and like his flight, harked back to race. He betrayed the consciousness that he and his people had a past, if they dare avow it, and might have a future, if they could but divine it.⁸¹

As Adams presented him in The Education, Henry Cabot Lodge was about the best that can be hoped for in contemporary American politics.⁸² He had had considerable potential as an ideal statesman: of the five qualities Adams had

⁸¹Education, pp. 419-20.

⁸²As late as November 10, 1911, when writing his brother Charles Francis Adams, Henry Adams complained: "Since the Civil War, I think we have produced not one figure that will be remembered a lifetime. . . . What is more curious, I think the figures have not existed. The men have not been born." Ford, Letters II, p. 576.

admired in Albert Gallatin, Lodge had a generous portion of three--ability, knowledge and social fitness (Adams' reference to "race" in the passage quoted above was in part a reference to his social fitness). Of the other two--unselfishness and integrity--Lodge had less than he needed. Despite--indeed because of Henry Cabot Lodge's success in the Senate, where for years he controlled Republican party patronage, Adams chose to depict him as a failure. Because "in domestic politics, everyone works for an immediate object, commonly some private job," Lodge could not act even on significant issues except from "small motives."⁸³ He, like lesser men, became a "fraud, of necessity," and offered Adams' persona further proof that power was poison.⁸⁴

Set up in contrast to Henry Cabot Lodge's failure in The Education was John Hay's relative success. Hay fell short of Adams' ideal statesman in a much less significant way than did Lodge. He had a sufficient quantity not only of ability and knowledge, but of integrity and unselfishness as well. Only his origin as a westerner qualified his social fitness. An additional point in his favor was the fact that he was not a professional office-seeker, but a gifted amateur instead:

⁸³Education, p. 422; Blackmur, p. 161.

⁸⁴"To Charles Milnes Gaskell," 23 January 1896, Ford, Letters II, p. 94.

Hay had no wish to be Secretary of State. . . . Hay needed no office in order to wield influence. For him, influence lay about the streets, waiting for him to stoop to it; he enjoyed more than enough power without office; no one of his position, wealth and political experience, living at the centre of politics in contact with the active party managers, could escape influence. His only ambition was to escape annoyance, and no one knew better than he that, at sixty years of age, sensitive to physical strain, still more sensitive to brutality, vindictiveness, or betrayal, he took office at cost of life.⁸⁵

Against his own inclination and best interests, so Adams claimed, Hay took office, and he performed well as a result of his own virtues and the fact that in foreign affairs--if not in domestic affairs--it was still possible to balance theory and practice: In the office of Secretary of State, a man still stood alone. Though he needed a broader vision than party politics generally allowed and though he was hard beset by the Senate, he could still at least appear to impose his will upon events:

Required to look far ahead and around him he [a secretary of state] measures forces unknown to party managers, and has found Congress more or less hostile ever since Congress first sat. The Secretary of State exists only to recognize the existence of a world which Congress would rather ignore; or obligations which Congress repudiates whenever it can; of bargains which Congress distrusts and tries to turn to its advantage or to reject. Since the

⁸⁵ Education, pp. 364-65.

first day the Senate existed, it has always intrigued against the Secretary of State whenever the Secretary has been obliged to extend his functions beyond the appointment of Consuls in Senators' service.⁸⁶

Despite Senatorial obstructionism, "Hay had become the most imposing figure ever known in the office. He had an influence that no other Secretary of State ever possessed"⁸⁷

Adams' estimation of Hay's success was certainly an overstatement of his actual achievement, and it may have been, in part, the product of his love for a friend recently dead. But a reader must never forget that however closely the text of The Education seems to parallel the life of its author, it is a work of the creative imagination, and the John Hay of The Education was as much an invented character as he was a real one. The role he played was similar to that of Albert Gallatin in the historical studies. In his final assessment of Hay, Adams wrote:

Unless education marches on both feet--theory and practice--it risks going astray; and Hay was probably the most accomplished master of both then living. He knew not only the forces but also the men, and he had no other thought than his policy.⁸⁸

⁸⁶Education, p. 442.

⁸⁷Education, p. 422.

⁸⁸Education, p. 424.

The effectiveness of both Hay and Gallatin--their success even--rested in the correctness of their judgment, which in Adams' own scale of value counted for more than mere action.

The lack of energy in government--particularly in the Executive branch--was something Adams had complained of frequently in his historical writings. Presidents needed more energy than most politicians to fight the awesome power of the Senate, yet they seemed to have less. Their lack of ability, knowledge, integrity, unselfishness and social fitness was in part the cause and in part the result of their hard scrabble for office through the corrupting party machinery. The price of power was social and physical degeneration:

Office was more poisonous than priestcraft or pedagogy in proportion as it held more power; but the poison he complained of was not ambition; . . . his poison was that of the will--the distortion of sight--the warping of mind--the degradation of tissue--the coarsening of taste--the narrowing of sympathy to the emotions of a caged rat.⁸⁹

Only one President in the second half of the nineteenth century had proved an exception--Abraham Lincoln alone found resources within himself to meet the demands of the office in a time of great national peril, but both the man and the situation were exceptional. Lincoln, like Gallatin and Hay, had been an

⁸⁹ Education, p. 365.

extraordinary man, and even he might not have succeeded had the historical situation been different.

That the potential power lying latent in the office of the President might itself be the source of destructive forces was another lesson Adams had acknowledged long before he wrote The Education. Ulysses S. Grant had provided that object lesson. As late as 1911, Adams still saw Grant's administration as a significant symbol of the failure of his own personal ambition and of the promise of democracy to achieve a better world. "I have always considered that Grant wrecked my own life, and the last hope or chance of lifting society back to a reasonably high plane. Grant's administration is the dividing line between what we hoped, and what we have got."⁹⁰

In that chapter of The Education which is entitled "Twenty Years After," Adams claimed that his "costly education in politics had led to political torpor."⁹¹ Thus he turned in much of the remainder of the book to the study, first, of theology and then of science in an effort to find answers to the old problem of whether modern man could impose order on the chaos of his existence. This change in emphasis accounted for a decreased consideration of the effects of the administrations of various Presidents on the Adams persona in the

⁹⁰"To Charles Francis Adams," 10 November 1911, Ford, Letters II, p. 575.

⁹¹Education, p. 321.

years between 1880 and 1900. Garfield was presented only as a fellow reformer of the young Adams, and Arthur was not mentioned at all. Harrison and Cleveland were the recipients of slightly more attention when Adams described them as professional politicians and sarcastically judged them "the greatest of Presidents" in the respect that "whatever harm they might do their enemies was nothing when compared to the mortality they inflicted on their friends."⁹² Only McKinley and Roosevelt received the sort of symbolic conversion Adams had practiced on Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln and Grant.

A McKinley elevated far above any judgment Adams had previously made of him became a metaphor for the point which "the acceleration of movement in politics" had reached about 1900.⁹³ Adams' study of science-technology-energy led him to conclude that new forces were at work speeding society toward a general disintegration. Adams described the situation as follows:

The work of domestic progress is done by masses of mechanical power--steam, electric, furnace, or other--which have to be controlled by a score or two of individuals who have shown capacity to manage it. The work of internal government has become the task of controlling these men, who are socially as remote as heathen gods, alone worth knowing, but never known, and who

⁹²Education, p. 320.

⁹³Education, p. 423.

could tell nothing of political value if one skinned them alive. Most of them have nothing to tell, but are forces as dumb as their dynamos, absorbed in the development or economy of power. . . . but the power will remain as before, whoever manages it, and will then control society without appeal, as it controls its stokers and pit-men. Modern politics is, at bottom, a struggle not of men but of forces. The men become ever more and more creatures of force ⁹⁴

McKinley attempted to solve "the problem of American government" in a way that was both "practical and American": he tried to "pool interest in a general trust."⁹⁵ Thus "McKinleyism" became "a system of combinations, consolidations, trusts, realized at home, and realizable abroad."⁹⁶ It was this purpose John Hay had so steadily in mind in his tenure as Secretary of State. But McKinley died by an assassin's hand, and the tide of chaos had barely been stemmed.

Theodore Roosevelt became a final lesson in Henry Adams' political education. In his study of the forces at work in human society, Adams identified two from the past--the inertia of race and the inertia of sex. A third and new force began to develop in American society about the time of the Civil War: mechanical energy. Science and technology had loosed

⁹⁴Education, p. 421.

⁹⁵Education, p. 373.

⁹⁶Education, p. 423.

this force into society. Its limits were unknown, but it clearly had the power to destroy the order and unity of society. With "[t]he pen [that] works for itself, and acts like a hand, modelling the plastic material over and over again to the form that suits it best," Adams the narrator re-created Roosevelt to represent the new force, to be shaped by it, to be its instrument and victim.⁹⁷ "Roosevelts are born," he said, "and never can be taught."⁹⁸ He was flawed as Grant had been, only more so: he "showed the singular primitive quality that belonged to ultimate matter . . . he was pure act."⁹⁹ The final lesson that Roosevelt taught was the old one that power corrupts:

Power is poison. Its effect on Presidents had been always tragic, chiefly as an almost insane excitement at first, and a worse reaction afterwards; but also because no mind is so well balanced as to bear the strain of seizing unlimited force without habit or knowledge of it; and finding it disputed with him by hungry packs of wolves and hounds whose lives depend on snatching the carrion. Roosevelt enjoyed a singularly direct nature and honest intent, but he lived naturally in restless agitation that would have worn out most tempers in a month, and his first year of Presidency showed chronic excitement that made a friend tremble. The effect of unlimited power on

⁹⁷Education, p. 389.

⁹⁸Education, p. 419.

⁹⁹Education, p. 417.

limited mind is worth noting in Presidents because it must represent the same process in society, and the power of self-control must have limit somewhere in the face of the control of the infinite.¹⁰⁰

In a letter to his friend Charles Milnes Gaskell, Adams had once quipped: "Why can't one run governments as one likes? What are they for, anyway?"¹⁰¹ He spent most of his life trying to answer those questions seriously. He examined the value of democracy both as an ideal and as a form of government. He found it lacking, but he also discovered nothing better to replace it. In seeking its validity as an ideal, he discovered it to be flawed because it assumed as its base the premises that men are naturally good--which they are not--and that they have free will--which they do not, as circumstances always are stronger. As a form of government it proved neither particularly efficient nor particularly virtuous, but seemed to carry the seeds of corruption in its very system. The new forces at work in the early twentieth century suggested to Adams that the American system and the American mind were being propelled along a path that would lead to the ultimate disintegration of society. The only possibility that the acceleration might be stopped or at least controlled seemed to Adams to be dependent upon the development of some

¹⁰⁰Education, p. 418.

¹⁰¹16 November 1896, Ford, Letters II, p. 118.

evolutionary leap in human thought, in the thinking process. He wrote The Education of Henry Adams in the hope that the lessons taught by the failures of the last generation--failures that ultimately could be attributed to what Ernest Samuels called "deficiency of mind"¹⁰²--would help the new generation meet the challenge. But Adams concluded with characteristic pessimism that he himself had little faith that such an evolutionary leap in traditional modes of thought would occur.

¹⁰²Samuels III, p. 370.

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