

McCULLOUGH'S ADAMS

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There is so much that is instructive and entertaining to read in David McCullough's monumental and best-selling biography "John Adams" (Simon & Schuster, 2001). To be exact, there are 651 pages (not counting acknowledgments, source notes, bibliography and index) and I commend them all to you.

Adams, our second president, was a top-rank, revolutionary founder of America. If you're searching for relevance, he was not only president, but so was his son, John Quincy Adams. Both were defeated for reelection.

Adams was born in 1735 and died in 1826. He was ambassador to England, France and Holland during the blazing years of the American Revolution and it's unsettling aftermath. He was a political philosopher and a classicist. He was George Washington's loyal vice president. As president, he kept American honor high, and, on a close call, wisely kept us out of a European war.

Boosters of Adams are using McCullough's book to promote an Adams monument on the Mall. They might do well to have a joint monument to John and Abigail Adams both. She was a super-feminist before there were feminists.

(Hillary can wait 175 years before we render judgment.)

The passionate fights and feuds between Thomas Jefferson, Alexander Hamilton and Adams add intrigue, sex and skullduggery to the tale and remind us how civil our politics are today. (Really.) In McCullough's version, no one is perfect or close to perfect. But even after noting that Adams "could be blunt, stubborn, opinionated, vain, and given to jealousy," and despite Adams' acceptance of a move to curb the free press in a time of extreme crisis, the

gold ring of credibility and solid good sense goes to Adams, by far.

(Jefferson, it was acknowledged, was "the pen" of the Declaration of Independence; Adams was "the voice.")

The founders knew what they were up to. Just before the signing of the declaration in July of 1776 Adams wrote: "Objects of the most stupendous magnitude, measures in which the lives and liberties of millions, born and unborn, are most essentially interested, are now before us. (He wasn't talking about stem cells.) We are in the midst of revolution, the most complete, unexpected, and remarkable of any in the history of the world."

It was news that was worthy of page 1 above the fold, most every day of Adams' adult life. But communication and transportation were problems. During the crucial time of the American Revolution there were no telegraphs, no telephones, no railroads, no radios, no CNN and no Fox. There were no pagers and no 24/7 cable channels.

How did nations know what was going on? Barely. How, particularly, when it took many days to get messages from Boston to Philadelphia? How, particularly, when it could take a couple of months to get word from ambassadors posted across a dangerous ocean? Adams first stormy trip to France was in 1778 and "the ship was a wreck, it's main mast split above and below the deck." It also engaged in a naval battle. Had war been declared? Had a treaty been signed? Who knew? When? These days communication takes an instant; it's the decisions that take years.

(And by the way, for every sailor in the British navy killed in action, 17 died of disease.)

As you'll find out for yourself if you delve into "John Adams," there are two big substantive issues at play, not entirely unrelated. The first, the supreme, was national independence. We

won it. Some Americans still worry that we'll lose sovereignty, bit by bit. By my lights, we continue to work with vigor and difficulty toward one country, under God, with liberty and justice for all.

The second concerns how power and authority will be divided. Might the president become a monarch? How should the states, the federal bureaucracy, the Congress, the courts, the cities and many other jurisdictions divide power? Do we want a big government that leans toward some moderate centralism, or a federation of governments that always bicker, sometimes constructively. (Like most presidents, Adams was a moderate activist.)

That federal argument has relevance these days, as we follow the course of the partial privatization of Social Security, the patients' bill of rights, and the energy bill, to just begin a very long list. Adams died 175 years ago. Rest assured, 175 years from now, that argument will still be in play.

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