



John Adams: The Most Conservative of Founding Fathers

As Russell Kirk suggests in his classic, [The Conservative Mind](#), there is no one among America's Founding Fathers who provides as articulate and discerning a vision of genuinely conservative thought as John Adams.

Adams was a man of great learning and genius. He also is among the most prolific political authors that the United States ever produced. Kirk says that his "body of political thought exceeds, both in bulk and in penetration, any other work on government by an American." Yet uniting his voluminous writings are certain characteristically conservative themes.

Regarding the egalitarian's dream regarding "the natural equality" of all human beings, Adams is dismissive. In a letter to his friend, turned adversary, turned friend again, Thomas Jefferson, Adams is blunt: "*Jus cuique*, the golden rule, is all the equality that can be supported or defended by reason or common sense."

In his correspondence with John Taylor, Adams writes: "That all men are born to equal rights is clear. Every being has a right to his own, as moral, as sacred, as any other has. This," he says, "is as indubitable as a moral government in the universe." However, as for the egalitarian fiction that was taking his world by storm, "for honor's sake," and "for truth and virtue's sake, let American philosophers and politicians despise it."

Adams remarks: "But to teach that all men are born with equal powers and faculties, to equal influence in society, to equal property and advantages through life, is as gross a fraud, as glaring an imposition on the credulity of the people, as ever was practiced by monks, by Druids, by Brahmins, by priests of the immortal Lama, or by the self-styled philosophers of the French Revolution."

The egalitarianism of his contemporaries is an "ideology." For Adams, this meant that it is "the science of Idiocy." Moreover, it is "a very profound, abstruse, and mysterious science" that yields no "discoveries" and "no bottom." The ideology of egalitarianism is "the bathos, the theory, the art, the skill of diving and sinking in government." It is what's "taught in the school of folly," "the academy" of which, along with several prominent French thinkers, such notable defenders of the American Revolution as Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Paine "were the great masters."

Adams warns his American and French contemporaries that "amid all their exultations," these utopians would be well served to recognize that "the perfectibility of man is only human and terrestrial perfectibility." Their best efforts will never change the fact that "cold will still freeze and fire will never





Written by [Jack Kerwick, Ph.D.](#) on July 4, 2013

cease to burn; disease and vice will continue to disorder, and death to terrify mankind." Human beings are motivated by "self-preservation" and "emulation." Adams adds that only "the balance of a well-ordered government will be able to prevent" the latter "from degenerating into dangerous ambition, irregular rivalries, destructive factions, wasting seditions, and bloody wars."

However, even if the human perfectibility of the egalitarian dreamers was possible, it wouldn't be desirable. "Grief drives men into habits of serious reflection, sharpens the understanding, and softens the heart; it compels them to rouse their reason, to assert its empire over their passions, propensities, and prejudices, to elevate them to a superiority over all human events." Adams concludes that "in short," grief makes human beings into "stoics and Christians."

Particularly in our day, when it has become second nature for Americans, including self-described "conservatives," to turn to their government to satisfy their material needs and desires, Adams' individuality is a tough pill to swallow. But it is true. Just as importantly, he knew that grief, in conjunction with "the balance of a well-ordered government" — a government comprised of "a balance of power," as Adam described it — is necessary for the preservation of liberty.

"The numbers of men in all ages have preferred ease, slumber, and good cheer to liberty, when they have been in competition. We must not then depend alone upon the love of liberty in the soul of man for its preservation." The love for liberty is no "more rational, generous, or social, in one" man than in another "until in man it is enlightened by experience, reflection, education, and civil and political institutions."

Liberty is not an abstraction, Adams knew, but a culturally-specific good dependent upon institutional arrangements and moral tradition.

This Independence Day, let us recall the largely lost wisdom of the man who probably is the most conservative of the Founding Fathers.



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