



## JULY 4TH, 1826 AND THE PASSING OF 'HIS ROTUNDITY JOHN ADAMS'

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Fireworks, parades, family reunions, political speeches, ceremonies... The 4th of July, day in which the Declaration of Independence was approved back in 1776—despite the fact that this document was actually ratified on the 2nd—has been held as a day of celebration of 'Americanness' all throughout US history. Even though the symbolism of this day could lead to the production of millions of essays on a wide range of topics, I have the honour to dedicate this short post to the 194th anniversary of the death of two of the most extraordinary men in the history of the United States: John Adams and Thomas Jefferson. Yet, to avoid overwhelming you with infinite pages on these two figures, I've decided to devote this post only to Mr Adams, whose great achievements have been portrayed in the 2008 HBO miniseries *John Adams*. Through the reading of archival sources and the help of the representation built in the TV adaptation, I'll try to draw a brief portrait of this historical figure.

"I consider you and him, as the North and South poles of the American Revolution.—Some talked, some wrote—and some fought to promote & establish it, but you, and Mr Jefferson thought for us all," stated Mr Adams' personal doctor in a letter to the former President in 1812 ("To John Adams from Benjamin Rush"). United in the cause to unchain the United States from the bonds of Great Britain, soon the lives of Mr Adams (Paul Giamatti) and Mr Jefferson (Stephen Dillane) took both different paths and political stands. John Adams' neutrality during the early stages of the Revolution in Boston—depicted in the first episode of the HBO miniseries—gained him enough credit to become one of the Massachusetts delegates to the Continental Congress. Soon he entered in several disputes over the way the Thirteen Colonies should proceed against Great Britain, discussions that have been wonderfully portrayed in the second episode of *John Adams*. After heated debates, especially with Pennsylvanian John Dickinson (Željko Ivanek) and South Carolinian Edward Rutledge (Clancy O'Connor), Adams managed to achieve the implementation of a



Declaration of Independence, mainly the brainchild of Adams, Thomas Jefferson—the mastermind behind such document—and Benjamin Franklin (Tom Wilkinson).

Even if the Declaration was ratified on the 2nd, it was on July 4th, 1776 when independence would be declared by the thirteen rebellious colonies. Despite having General George Washington (David Morse) as the supreme commander in chief, US efforts were not enough to win the war over Great Britain. By this, John Adams, together with his son John Quincy (Ebon Moss-Bachrach), was required to join Benjamin Franklin in Paris to negotiate a treaty of alliance with France, as well as loans for the American cause. I am sure the way Paris is depicted in *John Adams* goes hand in hand with the impression that the French capital actually made on the very Mr Adams. In episode 3, the city is portrayed as marked by enlightenment and finesse, as well as vicious and lavish, principles in direct conflict with Adams' conservatism. After his failed mission in France, Adams looked for funding in the Netherlands, before being called upon as ambassador to the Court of the British King George III (Tom Hollander) in 1785. As a personal remark, I consider Adams meeting with the British King in the fourth episode one of the tensest moments I've ever seen on TV. Even his mission in Europe proved to be successful—he got a considerable amount of money from loans and negotiated the Treaty of Paris of 1783—his independent, unbending temperament was not the ideal for diplomacy ("John Adams' Diplomatic Missions").

Far from his wife Abigail (Laura Linney), from whom up to 1785 he had spent more time far than together, Adams decided to return indefinitely with his family in 1789. The elections of that same year granted him the office of vice president under President George Washington, a position he nearly turned down as he considered it "the most insignificant Office that ever the Invention of Man contrived or his imagination conceived" ("Letter from John Adams to Abigail Adams"). Being his main role to preside the Senate, he quickly gained the nickname of 'His Rotundity', due to Adams tireless efforts to give the US presidency a title with the same pomp and grandeur of European royalty to fill it with respectability on the world stage. As expected, most senators were offended by these royal overtones and instead approved the title 'President of the United States' ("The Vice Presidency of John Adams").

Both Washington and Adams' presidential administrations were highly influenced by the events that were taking place at that very time on the other side of the Atlantic. The French Revolution—and specially the excesses that commenced after the September Massacre of 1792 and during the Reign of Terror of 1793 and 1794—put the United States in a delicate situation. In 1793 Great Britain, the principal source of American trade, joined the European coalition of forces against France. While Washington declared US neutrality, London sought to prevent American trade with the French. In order to prevent war with the British, the Treaty of Jay was signed in 1794, arising jealousies among the French, who now sought to ruin commerce between the Americans and the British ("John Adams: Foreign Affairs"). It



was within this context that Adams came into power as President in 1797, sided by Thomas Jefferson as vice president.

As depicted in the HBO miniseries, John Adams would devote almost his entire presidency to avoid what he deemed as an “unnecessary war” (Gross 2005, 90) with France. To do so, he stood faithful by his independent, unbending character, as otherwise the pro-British Alexander Hamilton (Rufus Sewell) would determine his policies as he did with Washington—as Adams asserted. Clashing with Jefferson in their policies, Adam’s tenacity against entering at war with the French is finally rewarded with Napoleon’s assertions that the problems between the United States and France were little more than a family quarrel. Yet, the Alien and Sedition Acts approved during his presidency—to prevent French espionage within US borders—limited freedom of speech and press, something that will hang over Adam’s administration for the rest of history (“John Adams: Foreign Affairs”).

In 1801 Thomas Jefferson would succeed in the presidency John Adams, who retired until the end of his days to his farm in Peacefield. There he had to endure the death of his daughter Nabby (Sarah Polley) from cancer, and of wife Abigail of old age. Adams spent his last days corresponding with Thomas Jefferson, as wonderfully represented in episode 7 of *John Adams*. Finally, on the 50th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence—July 4th, 1826—both Adams and Jefferson passed away, a coincidence that was, as then President John Quincy Adams lately stated, “visible and palpable remarks of Divine Favor” (Medved 2016).

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