increasingly independent status. This, when in combination with a president of
an independent cast of mind, led to situations that ran amok, as they did under
Richard Nixon. For Jimmy Carter, independence took on a popular tinge; it was
not just antiparty, it was in some ways antigovernment.

An independent president has long had the ability to go over the heads of
both Congress and party and appeal for support to the American people. With
the advent of radio, and even more important, of television, presidents could turn
ever more directly to the public. Jimmy Carter might have been able to maintain
his outsider status had he developed a more effective personal use of the media.
But unable to rally the country to his own high standards, he ended up alone and
at the mercy of a hostile Congress. In sharp contrast was the performance of his
successor, Ronald Reagan, who became known because of his mastery of the
media as “the great communicator.”

At its best, the independent cast of mind produces admirable qualities.
Presidents like Adams and Taylor and Hayes and Carter each stood for important
principles and could point to meaningful accomplishments. Each was able to rise
above petty partisanship, and set a standard of decency for others to follow. But
when independence takes the place of working effectively with others, problems
inevitably arise. In an era of divided government, independence can mean irrele-
vance, the inability to forge connections and bridge divisions. To be truly effec-
tive in the presidency, one cannot in the end downplay politics. And yet the
promise of independent leadership, of those who will put national interest above
partisan politics, survives. And the model of an independent executive can set an
example for every president to chart his own moral course.

JOHN ADAMS
1797–1801
Going It Alone

John Adams was in many ways the deepest thinker of his generation, an ideal-
list whose calling card was his extraordinary independence. “I must be indepen-
dent as long as I live,” he once said. “The feeling is essential to my existence.” He
was a man of opposites—a brilliant and courageous visionary on one hand; vain,
suspicious, and irascible on the other. Thomas Jefferson praised him as “pro-
found” and “amiable” but also called him “irritable and a bad calculator of [oth-
ers’] motives.”

The roots of Adams’s lonely integrity lay in his Puritan heritage in rural
Massachusetts. “I was born and bred in the ancient town of Braintree, now called
Quincy,” he wrote. “There I began to love my books.” Though his parents hoped
he would enter the ordained ministry, the idea soon came to rankle the young
Adams. “I had some faculty for public speaking,” he later wrote, “and determined
that I should make a better lawyer than divine.”

He rose to become Boston’s foremost attorney, often standing alone and tak-
ing on controversial causes. His successful defense of nine British soldiers arrest-
ed after the “Boston Massacre” was unpopular, but it reinforced a reputation for
sticking to his own principles. “The object of all my wishes, and of all my poli-
tics,” he said, “is the triumph of stubborn independence.”
America in the 1770s consisted of two and a half million British citizens whose relationship to England was steadily worsening. Following the Boston Tea Party, in 1773, the British shut down the port of Boston. From his farm in Quincy, John Adams wrote, “The die is cast.”

“Swim or sink, live or die, survive or perish with my country was my unalterable determination.”

In June of 1774, thirty-eight-year-old Adams was elected a Congressional delegate to a meeting of the thirteen colonies to take place in what would become known as Independence Hall in Philadelphia. Converted to the Patriot cause by his fiery cousin Samuel Adams, he became one of the earliest proponents of revolution. And he was a tireless worker, serving eventually on some fifty committees, and chairing twenty-five of them. His contemporaries soon called him the “Atlas” of independence. But he also made enemies. Always convinced he was right, he refused to compromise and called people “fools” to their faces when they disagreed with him. “I would quarrel with every individual before I would prostitute my pen,” he wrote. “I am determined to preserve my independence, even at the expense of my ambition.”

War erupted in 1776, and John Adams was placed in charge of a committee to draft a declaration of independence. As Adams later remembered it, rather self-servingly, the committee then appointed him, along with the young Thomas Jefferson, to draw up the text of the declaration. Claiming a key role in the discussions that preceded composition, Adams said he then requested his eloquent junior to do the actual writing. And so it was the tall, charismatic Jefferson who became the author of the Declaration of Independence, leaving John Adams to regret it for the rest of his life. “Jefferson ran away with . . . all the glory of it,” he wrote.

Adams continued to work for American independence, in missions to France and then England, where he helped negotiate an end to the Revolutionary War. And in 1788, after nearly a decade abroad, he finally returned to a new house in Quincy, where he planned to retire. But retirement didn’t lie within Adams’s power, for just one year later he was elected the country’s first vice president and was forced to leave his beloved Quincy once again. Most of Adams’s eight years serving under George Washington were spent in Philadelphia’s Congress Hall. And during that time he came to detest the vice presidency. “My country has in its wisdom contrived for me the most insignificant office that ever man contrived,” he wrote, “a mere mechanical tool to wind up the clock.”

In 1797, in an orderly transfer of power that astonished the world, Adams became the nation’s second president. But if he had looked to the office to give him the same power George Washington had wielded, he soon found that the office itself didn’t provide it. And his superior attitude eventually put him on a collision course with nearly everyone in government. Though Adams retained George Washington’s entire cabinet, he was suspicious of their loyalties and largely ignored them. “When the people have chosen their Presidents,” he wrote, “they ought to expect they will act their own independent judgments.”

As president, all too often his independence was counterproductive. When Congress met to debate whether to establish an alliance with France or England, Adams stubbornly refused to commit himself to either side. He saw it as his moral duty to stand apart from and above all others. “Two parties existed in this country headed by men of the most determined ambition,” he wrote, “the one inclined to France and the other to England. It was my destiny to run the gauntlet between these two factions.”

Though Adams was himself a Federalist, what he really wanted to be was above both the Jeffersonian Republicans and the Hamiltonian Federalists, in the
same way that George Washington had been above them. But there was no way that Adams could accomplish this; he simply did not possess Washington’s immense stature or his ability to hold divergent factions together. And failing to cultivate support on either side, he ended up with little support from either.

Adams’s presidency became consumed by an international crisis, triggered by France, which was harassing American ships at sea. After failed diplomatic efforts, the President pushed through the creation of a new Department of the Navy, and ordered the rapid buildup of American naval forces. But as war fever raged across the country, Adams suddenly reversed his initial tough position. His new stance, in favor of revised peace efforts, turned the Hamilton faction of his own party against him, and led to a full-scale cabinet revolt. “Hamilton . . . intends to drive the country into war with France,” Adams wrote. “He is a man devoid of every moral principle,” he added. “Either he is stark mad or I am.”

As the crisis mounted, Adams turned to George Washington for help, asking him to resume his old duties as commander of the armies. But in doing so Adams compromised his own presidency, undermining his standing as commander-in-chief. Ignoring his increasing political isolation, Adams worked alone on a plan for a peace mission to France. Then in the midst of a political storm he retreated to his farm in Massachusetts, where he insisted he would govern in isolation. And there he remained for the next eight months of his presidency. Even his friends called it an “abdication.”

“The people elected me to administer the government, it is true,” he responded, “and I do administer it, here at Quincy.”

Toward the end of his term in office, Adams became the first president to live in the new Executive Mansion in the capital city of Washington. And there, the man who chose not to be an ordained minister offered a simple prayer for future presidents. “I pray heaven to bestow the best blessings on this house and on all that shall hereafter inhabit it. May none but honest and wise men ever rule under this roof.”

Adams finally did establish peace with France, but not in time to help restore his popularity. During his final year in office, he was publicly criticized as a man of “vanity” and “egotism,” who was “unfit” for the office of chief executive. “It was utterly impossible that I could have lived through one more year of such labors and cares,” he wrote. “It is a sad thing that simple integrity should have so many enemies in the world.”

In 1800, Adams lost his bid for reelection to Thomas Jefferson. And on March 4, 1801, he refused to take part in his successor’s inauguration. Instead, he quietly slipped out of town early that morning. “I left Washington on the 4th,” he wrote, “and arrived at Quincy on the 18th having trotted the bogs five hundred miles. . . . I found about a hundred loads of seaweed in my barnyard, and I thought I had made a good exchange—honors and virtues for manure.”

Adams lived on for twenty-five more years, long enough to reconcile his differences with his longtime political adversary, Thomas Jefferson and to witness his son John Quincy become the country’s sixth president. But when a neighbor tried to offer his congratulations about John Quincy, the older Adams grew cynical. “No man who ever held the office of President,” he muttered, “would congratulate a friend on obtaining it.” Toward the end, when he was described publicly as a man with few friends, the old sage became furious, and then grew wistful. “I fear the information is too true,” he said. “It is impossible that any man should run such a gauntlet as I have, and have many friends at the last.” Or, as he had written years before as he first came to understand his own nature, “A man who discovers a disposition to be independent seldom succeeds.”