

John Adams to Timothy Pickering

6 August, 1822.

Sir:—

Your favor of the 2d instant has prescribed a dismal plan, which I was never very well calculated to execute; but I am now utterly incapable. I can write nothing which will not be suspected of personal vanity, local prejudice, or Provincial and State partiality. However, as I hold myself responsible at this age, to one only tribunal in the universe, I will give you a few hints at all hazards.

As Mr. Hancock was sick and confined, Mr. Bowdoin was chosen at the head of the Massachusetts delegation to Congress. His relations thought his great fortune ought not to be hazarded. Cushing, two Adamses, and Paine, all destitute of fortune, four poor pilgrims, proceeded in one coach, were escorted through Massachusetts, Connecticut, New York, and New Jersey, into Pennsylvania. We were met at Frankfort by Dr. Rush, Mr. Mifflin, Mr. Bayard, and several other of the most active sons of liberty in Philadelphia, who desired a conference with us. We invited them to take tea with us in a private apartment. They asked leave to give us some information and advice, which we thankfully granted. They represented to us that the friends of government in Boston and in the Eastern States, in their correspondence with their friends in Pennsylvania and all the Southern States, had represented us as four desperate adventurers. "Mr. Cushing was a harmless kind of man, but poor, and wholly dependent on his popularity for his subsistence. Mr. Samuel Adams was a very artful, designing man, but desperately poor, and wholly dependent on his popularity with the lowest vulgar for his living. John Adams and Mr. Paine were two young lawyers, of no great talents, reputation, or weight, who had no other means of raising themselves into consequence, than by courting popularity."* We were all suspected of having independence in view. Now, said they, you must not utter the word independence, nor give the least hint or insinuation of the idea, either in Congress or any private conversation; if you do, you are undone; for the idea of independence is as unpopular in Pennsylvania, and in all the Middle and Southern States, as the Stamp Act itself. No man dares to speak of it. Moreover, you are the representatives of the suffering State. Boston and Massachusetts are under a rod of iron. British fleets and armies are tyrannizing over you; you yourselves are personally obnoxious to them and all the friends of government; you have been long persecuted by them all; your feelings have been hurt, your passions excited; you are thought to be too warm, too zealous, too sanguine. You must be, therefore, very cautious; you must not come forward with any bold measures, you must not pretend to take the lead. You know Virginia is the most populous State in the Union. They are very proud of their ancient dominion, as they call it; they think they have a right to take the lead, and the Southern States, and Middle States too, are too much disposed to yield it to them."

This was plain dealing, Mr. Pickering; and I must confess that there appeared so much wisdom and good

sense in it, that it made a deep impression on my mind, and it had an equal effect on all my colleagues.

This conversation, and the principles, facts, and motives, suggested in it, have given a color, complexion, and character, to the whole policy of the United States, from that day to this. Without it, Mr. Washington would never have commanded our armies; nor Mr. Jefferson have been the author of the Declaration of Independence; nor Mr. Richard Henry Lee the mover of it; nor Mr. Chase the mover of foreign connections. If I have ever had cause to repent of any part of this policy, that repentance ever has been, and ever will be, unavailing. I had forgot to say, nor had Mr. Johnson ever been the nominator of Washington for General.

Although this advice dwelt on my mind, I had not, in my nature, prudence and caution enough always to observe it. When I found the members of Congress, Virginians and all, so perfectly convinced that they should be able to persuade or terrify Great Britain into a relinquishment of her policy, and a restoration of us to the state of 1763, I was astonished, and could not help muttering, in Congress, and sometimes out of doors, that they would find, the proud, domineering spirit of Britain, their vain conceit of their own omnipotence, their total contempt of us, and the incessant representation of their friends and instruments in America, would drive us to extremities, and finally conquer us, transport us to England for trial, there to be hanged, drawn and quartered for treason, or to the necessity of declaring independence, however hazardous and uncertain such a measure might be.

It soon became rumored about the city that John Adams was for independence. The Quakers and proprietary gentlemen took the alarm; represented me as the worst of men; the true-blue sons of liberty pitied me; all put me under a kind of coventry. I was avoided, like a man infected with the leprosy. I walked the streets of Philadelphia in solitude, borne down by the weight of care and unpopularity. But every ship, for the ensuing year, brought us fresh proof of the truth of my prophecies, and one after another became convinced of the necessity of Independence. I did not sink under my discouragements. I had before experienced enough of the wantonness of popularity, in the trial of Preston and the soldiers, in Boston.

You inquire why so young a man as Mr. Jefferson was placed at the head of the Committee for preparing a Declaration of Independence? I answer; It was the Frankfort advice, to place Virginia at the head of every thing. Mr. Richard Henry Lee might be gone to Virginia, to his sick family, for aught I know, but that was not the reason of Mr. Jefferson's appointment. There were three committees appointed at the same time. One for the Declaration of Independence, another for preparing articles of Confederation, and another for preparing a treaty to be proposed to France. Mr. Lee was chosen for the Committee of Confederation, and it was not thought convenient that the same person should be upon both. Mr. Jefferson came into Congress, in June, 1775, and brought with him a reputation for literature, science, and a happy talent of composition. Writings of his were handed about, remarkable for the peculiar felicity of expression. Though a silent member in Congress, he was so prompt, frank, explicit, and decisive upon committees and in conversation, not even Samuel Adams was more so, that he soon seized upon my heart; and upon this occasion I gave him my vote, and did all in my power to procure the votes of others. I think he had one more vote than any other, and that placed him at the head of the committee. I had the next highest number, and that placed me the second. The committee met, discussed the subject, and

then appointed Mr. Jefferson and me to make the draught, I suppose because we were the two first on the list.

The sub-committee met. Jefferson proposed to me to make the draught. I said, I will not. You should do it. Oh! no. Why will you not? You ought to do it. I will not. Why? Reasons enough. What can be your reasons? Reason first—You are a Virginian, and a Virginian ought to appear at the head of this business. Reason second—I am obnoxious, suspected, and unpopular. You are very much otherwise. Reason third—You can write ten times better than I can. “Well,” said Jefferson, “if you are decided, I will do as well as I can.” Very well. When you have drawn it up, we will have a meeting.

A meeting we accordingly had, and conn'd the paper over. I was delighted with its high tone and the flights of oratory with which it abounded, especially that concerning negro slavery, which, though I knew his Southern brethren would never suffer to pass in Congress, I certainly never would oppose. There were other expressions which I would not have inserted, if I had drawn it up, particularly that which called the King tyrant. I thought this too personal; for I never believed George to be a tyrant in disposition and in nature; I always believed him to be deceived by his courtiers on both sides of the Atlantic, and in his official capacity only, cruel. I thought the expression too passionate and too much like scolding for so grave and solemn a document; but as Franklin and Sherman were to inspect it afterwards, I thought it would not become me to strike it out. I consented to report it and do not now remember that I made or suggested a single alteration. We reported it to the Committee of Five. It was read and I do not remember that Franklin or Sherman criticized anything. We were all in haste; Congress was impatient and the Instrument was reported, as I believe in Jefferson's handwriting as he first drew it. Congress cut off about a quarter part of it, as I expected they would, but they obliterated some of the best of it and left all that was exceptionable, if anything in it was. I have long wondered that the original draft has not been published. I suppose the reason is the vehement Phillipic against Negro Slavery. As you justly observe, there is not an idea in it but what had been hackney'd in Congress for two years before. The substance of it is contained in the declaration of rights and the violation of those rights, in the Journals of Congress in 1774. Indeed, the essence of it is contained in a pamphlet, voted and printed by the Town of Boston before the first Congress met; composed by James Otis, as I suppose in one of his lucid intervals, and pruned and polished by Saml Adams.

If there is any other question, that you wish to ask me, as long as my memory lasts, and I can procure an Amanuensis as good as the present, to answer you will give great pleasure to him, who is your Friend & Humble Servt.

John Adams

Hon.ble John Adams

Augt 5, 1822.

On the declaration of Independence, written by Mr. Jefferson.

+ Mr. Adams has forgotten, in saying R. H. Lee was one of the Committee of confederation. There was a member from each colony, on this comtee. see Journal of June 12, 1776, and Mr. Nelson was the

member from Virginia. I do not find R. H. Lee's name in the Journals, from June 7th (when the resolutions respecting Independency were moved) until Augt. 27, when he was added to the Committees on the plan of treaties with foreign powers: hence I presume he was absent, with his family (in Virginia) who had been sick; according to the information give me by his son-in-law, Charles Lee.

T. P.



Th. Jefferson
MONTICELLO