

## How an Early American First Couple Saw Europe

Jeanne E. Abrams, *A View from Abroad: The Story of John and Abigail Adams in Europe* (New York: New York University Press, 2021)

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Without doubt one of the most important aspect of American history, especially in the personal domain, is the office of the executive and some of the aspects pertaining to it: the presidents' domestic and foreign policy views and actions, their political credo, their religious views, and the list could go on. Since the presidents and their powers over the centuries have become critical concerning the course of American history, it is understandable that generations of historians have tried to capture and analyze almost all of their important moments, actions, and thoughts—mainly of those who are considered having been outstanding persons in White House. Jeanne E. Abrams's new book is another addition to this historian tradition. She focuses on John Adams, the second president of the United States, but she chose for her study a distinct point of view: how Adams and his wife related to Europe.

John Adams was president between 1797 and 1801, the first president to hold the office for only one term. To his bad luck, he was sandwiched between George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, and this fact, both regarding history and historiography, proved to be a considerable disadvantage. Washington, who is often viewed as a father figure of the nascent United States of America, has been the subject of overwhelming praise throughout American history. Jefferson, on his part, was the main author of the enshrined Declaration of Independence, and as third president he managed to double the territory of the young country by concluding the Louisiana Purchase in 1803. Compared to these two giants—who are always among the top five-ranked presidents of all time—, Adams indeed seems somewhat of a failure and weak president. Recently, however, there have been more sympathetic volumes about Adams's presidency, and his overall assessment seems to be on the rise.

This book studies not the presidential years of Adams but his early diplomatic career when he represented his fledgling country in the Old World, more precisely in France, the Netherlands, and Great Britain. This service of almost ten years—a considerable part of which he spent together with his wife, Abigail Adams, in Europe—meant an important period of the future president's life. Since he had only sporadic and secondhand information regarding Europe, the personal experience put many things in a different perspective, while his enthusiastic and fervent patriotism served his home country's interests. The long years he spent in the abovementioned countries of Europe and the work that he did there made him not only an expert of the political and cultural characteristics of Europe of the late eighteenth century, but as a diplomat he could also show how he was able—with devotion but still in a sensible manner—to further America's interests, although not all his efforts were crowned with success. Abrams's book tells the story of these ten years in a chronological order, and she examines what attitudes the future president and future first lady carried with them to Europe, and what influences or changes their experiences in the Old World caused.

John Adams set sail from Braintree, Massachusetts, in February 1778 in the middle of the War of Independence. He took with him his eldest son, the then ten-year-old John Quincy Adams, who later became a president in his own right in 1825, but he left behind his wife and three other children. Abigail only reluctantly stayed, but she had to manage the household and various interests of his husband while the latter was away. In Paris, France, Adams joined forces with Benjamin Franklin and Arthur Lee, both of whom had been already in the French capital, and who had been trying to secure and maintain larger French support for the American freedom fight. It is important to note that in the wake of the successful Battle of

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Saratoga in October 1777, which ended in a decisive American victory over the northern British forces, helped spawn the Treaty of Alliance between the United States and France the next February—exactly when Adams traveled to Europe.

The contemporary French conditions and society had a dual effect on Adams. On the one hand, he respected and on certain occasions almost admired the products of French culture and the art created by French artists. At the same time, the social structure and some basic characteristics of the country repelled him. Coming from a long line of Puritans, Adams instinctively had a strong aversion toward pomp and waste, both of which he amply witnessed in Versailles and Paris. The strictly separated social classes and the uncrossable boundaries between them disturbed his republican mind and attitude. The oft-occurring evidence of liberal morality was also against his basic rules of life and lifestyle. What he believed in was that a member of society lives for their family and country, works for the public good and not for personal gain and becoming rich. Although Adams perceived many things positively, for example, he often visited the theaters and the opera, but numerous circumstances and experiences were against his taste and convictions. This is significant because, as the author emphasizes, and it seems to be the thesis of the book, “Adam’s maiden journey to France would provide him with a firsthand opportunity to define with more clarity what separated America from European nations and to develop his ideal view of the emerging individual and national American identity.” (24) He was also convinced that America was head and shoulders above the to him seemingly harmful European standards.

Abrams also mentions that the relationship between Adams and Franklin was fraught because both men had a distinct approach to diplomacy. But the ultimate diplomatic goal was, in accordance with the early American republican view, to achieve a balance of power in Europe as this would mean the largest security for the young United States. Adams’s first diplomatic stint was soon over. The Congress called him home in the beginning of 1779, which caused him deep disappointment, but he could rejoin his family, and also did not stay long before leaving for Europe again.

The Congress must have been satisfied with his work in Paris, because soon enough he was commissioned to go to France one more time. His task was to carry on diplomatic representation and the hopefully soon-to-begin peace talks with the English diplomats—only after agreeing on various points with the French—, and to revive the all-important trade with Great Britain. This time, before reaching Paris, he spent some time in Spain first. This provided him with a golden opportunity to gain some insights into Spanish conditions whether political, trade, or general standard of living. He found that America in general was far superior to Spain, while in his view Massachusetts in particular was a hundred years ahead of that European country.

In Paris a lot of frustration was in store for Adams. The main reason for this stemmed from the fact that the French, quite naturally, wished to control the diplomatic moves according to their own interests. This was a major factor why after a few months Adams traveled north and spent the next almost two full years in the Netherlands. Here he tried to make sure that further aid was given to America, mostly financial, which endeavor was made easier by the American victory over the British at Yorktown in 1781. The Dutch made a much more favorable impression on Adams than the French, but the Americans came out on top in this comparison as well. This was a further proof for the American diplomat that his home country was destined for success—as he later wrote to John Jay, America was “destined beyond a doubt to be the greatest Power on Earth.” (67) In the spring of 1782, the Netherlands officially recognized the United States of America, in the wake of which Dutch loans started to come that proved to be a lifeline in the aftermath of the war, while in the fall a commercial treaty was also concluded between the two countries. After this Adams returned to Paris to begin, in the company of Franklin and John Jay, the peace talks with the British. Despite French pressure, the three American diplomats carried the day for American interests, and the Treaty of Paris between the USA and Great Britain in 1783 meant a famous diplomatic victory for which Adams could take some credit.

Adams’s diplomatic career did not slow down: he became the sole diplomatic representative of America in France. The major difference between the earlier stints and this

new one was that this time his wife, Abigail, sailed across the ocean to be able to accompany him in the French capital. Abigail was no ordinary American wife. She was well read and well educated, had a solid opinion on the world and the various issues of any situation, and she proved to be an intellectual equal and partner to John Adams. Being together in the Old World, now they could study together the European surroundings, and accordingly both of them formed an opinion on Europe: how it was different, and in what aspects it was better or worse than the young American republic. Abigail Adams came to a very similar conclusion to that of her husband regarding the comparison between the Old and New Worlds. Many things were pleasing to her in Paris, but in summary she held the viewpoint that her country was by far superior to what she witnessed in France. The desire toward freedom, the republican state form, and the public virtues all together guaranteed that Americans enjoyed that moral and political advantage that was furthered by geographical setting and commercial possibilities.

After nearly one year's stay in Paris, the Adams couple moved on, this time to Great Britain, where Adams became his country's first ambassador to the Court of St. James's from February 1785. The three years they spent in London provided the Adamses with many opportunities to get to know and size up the people of London. This had a political, a social, and cultural aspect as well. The British political sphere was rather cool toward Adams, whom not so long ago they called a traitor, partly because the general opinion was that the nascent overseas republic would not exist long. As a result, not everybody took seriously the diplomatic approach from the American ambassador, although one of the most important jobs in his new capacity for Adams would have been exactly to reach better relations especially in the realm of commerce. In this effort he ultimately failed, because the British government adamantly refused to sign such a treaty with America. According to the well-known anecdote, the British asked Adams how many treaties he wished to sign, one or thirteen, thereby referring to the thirteen member states and their dissent or outright dislike among them. For her part, Abigail had similar experiences to his husband's. But irrespective of how certain individuals in England related to them as the official diplomatic representative of the United States and his wife, both paid respect to the cultural joys London provided: theater, music, fine arts, or particular luxury items. Their opinion, however, did not change at all that the United States enjoyed a moral superiority over the European powers. Still, Britain was a more advantageous place to be in than was France: instead of the sometimes oppressive Catholic faith, here they were surrounded with Protestantism, which was their denomination as well. What was a shock to the American couple was the situation of the poor. Not only were the conditions under which these people tried to live terrible in the crowded capital, but also in the seemingly idyllic countryside. In this comparison the United States came out on top one more time since in America wealth distribution was more equal.

The 1786 Shays' Rebellion in Massachusetts had a big impact on John and Abigail Adams. This uprising unmistakably showed what ailments were eating at the young republic and the constitutions of the various member states. Adams took up the pen and put to paper his opinion on the subject that appeared in print. The major point of his book was that a strong executive was needed in order to prevent the appearance of oligarchs. This was an unpopular thought among many Americans, because they feared such a step would pave the way for the rising of a king or a dictator. At the same time, however, the masses needed to be controlled, because it was obvious that for an average individual personal interests overwhelmed the will to act for the community. Adams saw the solution in the balance of the governmental powers, that is, separation of the various branches of government and a bicameral legislative; control over the common people; belief in the responsibility for the public good and not far-fetched individualism or overwhelming liberty or equality. Expressing these opinions created tension with many former acquaintances. Such one example was none other than Thomas Jefferson, who, for his part, had a much more liberal view of and for the people. Although Adams's book coincided with the Constitutional Convention held in Philadelphia in 1787, which was to address the shortcomings of the Articles of Confederation and create a new constitution, it had little if any effect on it. Still, Adams's thoughts were similar to the overwhelming wishes of the political elite in the United States: the new Constitution, which was ratified the following year, rhymed in many ways with Adams's ideas. He only mentioned as missing from the text the

various civil rights and liberties, but this was remedied with the passing of the Bill of Rights in 1791.

John and Abigail Adams finally set sail for home in the spring of 1788—in the case of John this happened after nine years' stay in Europe. He received a hero's welcome in America, and not much later—now within the rules of the new Constitution—he became George Washington's vice president for two terms, then the second president of the country in his own right. That cemented his status as one of the leading founding fathers and personalities of the early United States.

In addition to a rich amount of secondary literature, the narrative of Abrams's book is to a large degree based on the correspondence of John and Abigail Adams—with each other and with various friends and colleagues. In the United States the contemporary documents, with the private letters of now famous people included, fortunately have been in most cases preserved. It helps the work of a historian delving into the early years of the republic. The letters of the Adamses not only embellish the book but reflect on problems that are still present in the twenty-first century. This alone would be sufficient for those interested in American history to read the book. But the thoughts of Adams' on of the burgeoning American identity and his comparisons to the Europe of the day, which is one of the clear strengths of the volume, tells the reader a lot about how the early American political elite was thinking, and for this the author reserves praise.