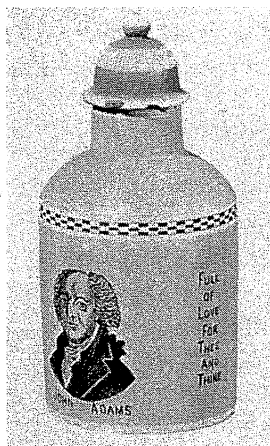


7 About President Adams

“The times, Madam, have made a Strange Being of me,” said John Adams to a friend, historian Mercy Otis Warren. He was, he admitted, “an irritable Fiery Mortal...as proud as a Caesar. But an honest man in all and to the Death.”

Joseph Ellis (a 20th-century writer) says that Adams “has come to be regarded by historians as the most engagingly human member of America’s founding generation.” *Engaging* means “charming” or “appealing.” What was it that made Adams human, too?

John Adams
PRESIDENT, 1797–1801



We have presidential buttons and bumper stickers. In Adams’s day he could find himself on jars and jugs.

he got carried away with his own ideas and forgot about reality. He had a hard time appreciating ideas that were different from his. Do you know anyone like that?

Sometimes when you study history it seems as if people in the past were all greater than people now. But they didn’t look that way to the people who knew them. Ben knew John. He knew his good points and his weak ones. And Adams had plenty of both.

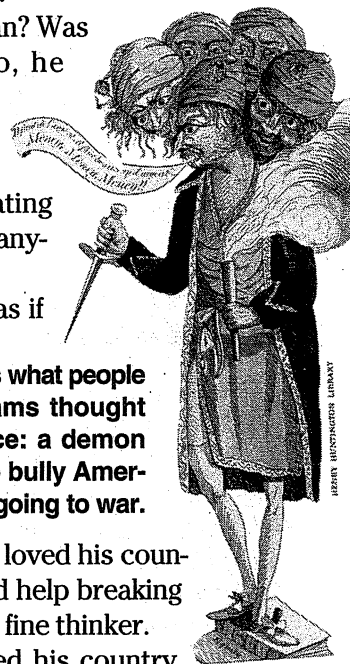
John Adams was brave and intelligent, and he loved his country. When he was young, and the country needed help breaking away from England, he was a strong leader and a fine thinker.

Then he went off to Europe, where he served his country

John Adams was a great man, but he was just passable as president. Now that is my opinion; you are free to disagree. Some historians do. Adams was a fine person—honorable and thoughtful. So was his wife, Abigail, and so, too, was their brilliant son John Quincy. Benjamin Franklin, who was pretty good at judging people, said Adams “was always an honest man, often a wise one, but sometimes and in some things, absolutely out of his senses.”

What did Franklin mean? Was John Adams crazy? No, he wasn’t crazy, it just seems that sometimes

This was what people like Adams thought of France: a demon trying to bully America into going to war.



THE NEW NATION

well as a diplomat in France, Holland, and England.

Perhaps he stayed too long in England. He grew fat and vain and peevish there. He grew to love English ceremony and English ways. He believed in representative government—what people called “republicanism”—but he didn’t think much of democracy. Like Alexander Hamilton, he thought the educated and the aristocratic should govern; he didn’t trust the mass of people. Once, at a dinner, Hamilton got angry at a Jeffersonian. Thomas Jefferson had faith that ordinary people could govern themselves, but when Hamilton heard that idea he pounded the table with his fist and said what he thought. “Your people, sir,” he said, “your people is a great beast!” And that was just what Hamilton, Adams, and the Federalists seemed to believe.

“Men are never good but through necessity,” John Adams said once, which means that people are good only if they have to be. Do you agree with that?

Many people do. And it may be true, but it wasn’t true of either Hamilton or Adams. John Adams was a good man even when he didn’t have to be. That means he always did what he thought was right—not necessarily what was popular. Remember, he was the lawyer who defended the British soldiers after the Boston Massacre. That certainly wasn’t a popular thing to do.

John Adams was a complicated man. Thomas Jefferson, who was Adams’s political opponent, wrote to a friend that John Adams was “so amiable, that I pronounce you will love him if ever you become acquainted with him.” But Jefferson found out that Adams wasn’t always amiable. Hamilton said Adams had a “temper.”

Perhaps Adams was just too independent to be a good politician. Perhaps he had grown lazy by the time he became president. The old John



This engraving of President Adams shows the seals of all 16 states. What does “Millions for our Defense, not a cent for tribute” mean? (Hint: look up the XYZ Affair in an encyclopedia.)

Amiable means “likable and easy to get along with.”

Adams and the Federalists believed that human nature needs to be controlled. Jefferson and the Democratic-Republicans believed human nature needs to be set free. One was a pessimistic view; the other was optimistic. There is truth in both.

Adams had a weakness for formal protocol. At receptions he wore velvet breeches and stood on a dais to greet guests.



Adams was different from the young John Adams. He was 61 when he became president, and he spent too much time at home in Quincy, Massachusetts, and too little time at the capital city. (Adams was away 385 days in four years as president; Washington was away 181 days in eight years.)

John Adams thought the best thing he did as president was to keep the United States out of war. He may have been right.

You see, France was fighting England. France had been America's best friend during the Revolutionary War, so the French thought the United States should side with them now against England.

Some Americans agreed. Others remembered the old ties with England and wanted to back England. President Adams wouldn't let our nation take sides; he kept the United States neutral.

That made the French angry. They captured some American ships and took the sailors prisoner. That made a lot of Americans angry, especially Alexander Hamilton, who wanted to enter the war on England's side—even though England was also capturing American ships. John Adams had to fight Hamilton and other people in his own party. He did. He kept America out of war.

He tried to do something else and failed. He tried to stop some of the nasty political fighting between the Federalists and the Democratic-Republicans. He couldn't do that. Like Alexander Hamilton, John Adams was a Federalist. He believed in a strong central government.

As you know, the Democratic-Republicans wanted as little government as possible. They had faith that people could govern themselves. They believed in democracy. They called the Federalists "monarchists," which wasn't quite fair.

People in the two parties got very, very angry at each other. If children acted the way the country's leaders were acting, their parents would tell them to stop being silly, make up, and be friends. But each side was scared for the nation. Most of the Federalists really seemed to believe that if the Democratic-Republicans were elected the country was doomed. The Republicans believed that the Federalists had already messed everything up.



John Adams said that "the affectionate participation and cheering encouragement" of his wife had been his "never-failing support."