Chapter 6

Adams and the Fuse of Rebellion

OF THE FIRST FOUR PRESIDENTS, JOHN ADAMS WAS FIRST OUT OF the gate on revolution as the solution to the troubled colonial American relationship with Britain. "Adams threw himself into Resistance to the Crown from the very beginning of the imperial crisis," note the historians Stanley Elkins and Eric McKitrick. While Washington still was seeking favor in that empire, while Jefferson quietly was studying law, and while Madison was just a boy, Adams raised the banner of rebellion. The people of Boston led the way toward independence, and he was among those who led that city in that direction. Many decades later, he would reminisce to Jefferson about how it happened:

> *What do We mean by the Revolution? The War? That was no part of the Revolution. It was only an Effect and Consequence of it. The Revolution was in the Minds of the People, and this was effected, from 1760 to 1775, in the course of fifteen years before a drop of blood was drawn at Lexington.*

That assertion of it being over by 1775 isn't completely true, because the Revolution could have failed in a variety of ways during the fighting. But Adams is right that many of the changes in the way of thinking happened before the first shot was fired. And he was one of the first to light the fuse of the Revolution.

Adams: "Let us dare"

UNSETTLED TIMES PROPEL PEOPLE TO PROMINENCE QUICKLY. A SINGLE pamphlet, or even one short essay, could put a person into the center of the public arena, especially if he or she could offer new ways to think about the emerging political order. John Adams was perfectly positioned to do just that. He began by making notes to himself about the situation in Massachusetts as tensions arose over the Stamp Act, passed by Parliament in March 1765 and aimed particularly at colonial lawyers and newspapers. His initial draft began with a visionary thought, one that would prove surprisingly prescient:

> *Liberty, . . . which has never been enjoyd, in its full Perfection, by more than ten or twelve Millions of Men at any Time, since the Creation, will reign in America, over hundreds and Thousands of Millions at a Time.*

It was a striking point at which to begin assessing the political situation, by looking deep into the future of the nation, when it would be vastly more populous than it was when he was writing. This is Adams at his best, taking the longest possible view as a way of organizing his strategic thinking, looking at American politics as the Scotsman Hutton had looked at the rocks of the Earth.

That summer, Adams began rallying Bostonians with a series of essays that appeared weekly in the *Boston Gazette*. He began by reminding them that their ancestors who crossed the Atlantic to settle in Massachusetts were not ignorant. "To many of them, the historians, orators, poets and philosophers of *Greece* and *Rome* were quite familiar." He depicted them as true sons of the Enlightenment, who in their modernism had no time for notions of divine right:

> *They knew that government was a plain, simple, intelligible thing founded in nature and reason and quite comprehensible by common*

sense. They detested all the base services, and servile dependencies of the feudal system. They knew that no such unworthy dependences took place in the ancient seats of liberty, the republic of Greece and Rome.

So, he concluded, "Liberty must at all hazards be supported. We have a right to it, derived from our Maker." This was about as succinct a summary of the radical American position as was possible: The American people had no need for a king to stand between them and God. Rather they had a God-given right to liberty.

It was time, he told his readers, for Americans to begin thinking and speaking in this revolutionary new way.

Let us dare to read, think, speak and write. Let every order and degree among the people rouse their attention and animate their resolution. Let them all become attentive to the grounds and principles of government, ecclesiastical and civil. Let us study the law of nature; search into the spirit of the British constitution; read the histories of ancient ages; contemplate the great examples of Greece and Rome. . . .

Given his mood swings and acute vanity, Adams is not always a reliable narrator of his own life. Even so, his own assessment of the extraordinary impact of his essay is worth noting:

it had an Effect upon the People of New England beyond all Imagination. . . . perhaps no one thing that ever was written or done contributed more than that Publication, to unite the People of New England, as one Man in the Resolution of opposing force, to the stamp Act, and of having recourse to Arms rather than submit to it.

Six weeks after the Stamp Act went into effect, Adams concluded the year with a characteristic diary entry. First, he was politically attentive. "The Year 1765 has been the most remarkable Year of my Life," he noted. "The People, even to the lowest Ranks,

have become more attentive to their Liberties, more inquisitive about them, and more determined to defend them, than they were ever before known or had occasion to be."

Then he wallowed in self-pity. He bewailed how the Stamp Act, by bringing the courts to a standstill, had stymied his rise as a lawyer:

> *Thirty Years of my Life are passed in Preparation for Business. I have had Poverty to struggle with—Envy and Jealousy and Malice of Enemies to encounter—no Friends, or but few to assist me, so that I have groped in dark Obscurity, till of late, and had but just become known, and gained a small degree of Reputation, when this execrable Project was set on foot for my Ruin as well as that of America in General, and of Great Britain.*

On January 1, he began the new year by predicting, correctly, that the British would have difficulty enforcing the act. "They will find it a more obstinate War, than the Conquest of Canada and Louisiana."

"The ball of revolution"

OTHER COLONISTS WERE EXCITED BY THE REVOLUTIONARY FERVOR IN Boston and worried by the clumsy British reaction. The Stamp Act was passed in March 1765. Protests began that summer, even though the act would not take effect until November 1. Down in Virginia, on May 29 of that year, Patrick Henry, speaking out against the act, strode up to the very line of treason. It was his first full week as a member of Virginia's House of Burgesses, and he was delivering his maiden speech. He finished by citing two examples of tyrants who had been killed. "Caesar had his Brutus, Charles the First his Cromwell, and George III [at this point, the Speaker of the House, John Robinson, shouted, "Treason!" and the cry was taken up by others] may profit by their example."

According to some accounts, he then arched his back and cried at his interrupters: "If this be treason, make the most of it." It was a magnificent bellow.

There was no visitors' gallery at the time, so Thomas Jefferson, then a twenty-two-year-old law student in Williamsburg, and just seven years younger than Henry, stood by the open door of the chamber, watching this speech. Jefferson had known Henry for years, since Henry's days as a saloonkeeper in Hanover, Virginia. Even as an adolescent, Jefferson had found Henry a bit backwoodsy. "His manners had something of the coarseness of the society he had frequented: his passion was fiddling, dancing & pleasantry. He excelled in the last," Jefferson wrote. This observation was not just Jefferson being a haughty young colonial gentleman. Henry was notorious in the Hanover area as an idler, more fond of hunting, fishing, and dancing than of work.

Jefferson was more impressed by Henry's public speaking. He wrote later that he "heard the splendid display of mr Henry's talents as a popular orator. They were great indeed; such as I have never heard from any other man. He appeared to me to speak as Homer wrote."

There have been some questions about what Henry's exact words were in some of his speeches, but in 1814, Jefferson gave his eyewitness account of Henry's denunciation of the Stamp Act to Henry's biographer, William Wirt. "I well remember the cry of treason, the pause of Mr. Henry at the name of George III, and the presence of mind with which he closed the sentence, and baffled the charge vociferated," Jefferson told him.

With that speech, Jefferson said, "he was certainly the man who gave the first impulse to the ball of revolution," at least in Virginia. The colonial governor apparently agreed about the impact of Henry's speech. On June 1, he dissolved the House of Burgesses and did not call it again for a year.

Jefferson would never be an admirer of Henry's character. The two would become antagonists during Jefferson's term as governor of Virginia, and Jefferson after that developed what he called a "mixed aspect" about the rambunctious Henry. He explained:

I think he was the best humored man in society I almost ever knew, and the greatest orator that ever lived. He had a consummate knowlege of the human heart, which directing the efforts of his eloquence enabled him to attain a degree of popularity with the people at large never perhaps equalled. His judgment in other matters was inaccurate in matters of law it was not worth a copper: He was avaritious & rotten hearted. His two great passions were the love of money & of fame: but when these came into competition the former predominated.

Jefferson Emerges

THE BRITISH GOVERNMENT RESPONDED TO THE AMERICAN DEMANDS with a cascade of acts meant to intimidate them. Each one was harsher, and each one provoked the colonialists more, antagonizing and uniting them. The Tea Act of 1773, for example, would lead to the Boston Tea Party in December of that year. This in turn provoked the Coercive Acts, meant to make an example of Boston by closing its port, ruining its businesses, and replacing its government with British military rule.

Virginians were also burdened by business problems. Ten London banking houses failed in mid-1772, leading to a credit crunch. During that contraction, surviving London banks called in their outstanding loans to American planters, among others. This hit especially hard among Virginians, who were responsible for some £1.4 million—that is, about half the total debt in the colonies to British merchants. To raise the cash to pay their debts, they flooded the market with tobacco, which in turn caused its price to drop by about half, making their finances even worse.

Dissident Americans decided to meet in what they would call the First Continental Congress. In preparing for that gathering, Thomas Jefferson stepped on the national stage for the first time, at the age of thirty-one. As happened with Adams and his essay, Jefferson was able to offer a way of thinking about the changing

politics of the colonies, to capture the changing mood of many and distill it into words. For Jefferson, this came in the form of his written advice to Virginia's delegation heading to the Congress, which soon was issued as a pamphlet under the title *A Summary View of the Rights of British America*. It was an odd debut. As one modern analyst puts it, the essay is both tendentious and a mishmash. In essence it was an awkward rhetorical rehearsal for some of the subjects Jefferson would cover with greater clarity two years later in the Declaration of Independence, especially in cataloguing the abuses and usurpations of British officials against America.

Even so, timing is everything in politics. What young Jefferson had to say had not been said before, so his words made a splash with his peers, who sat in taverns and living rooms and listened to them read aloud. George Washington noted in his account book that he purchased a copy on August 6, 1774. Two years later, John Adams noted in his diary that Jefferson "had been chosen a Delegate in Virginia, in consequence of a very handsome public Paper which he had written for the House of Burgesses, which had given him the Character of a fine Writer." That reputation in turn would propel Jefferson to be included in the group drafting a Declaration of Independence.

One of Jefferson's favorite ancient authors was Tacitus, the Roman chronicler. "Tacitus I consider as the first writer in the world without a single exception," he once wrote. Jefferson did not cite Tacitus by name in his discussion of American rights, but he almost certainly has the Roman's *Germania*—a sentimental portrayal of the German tribes as free-spirited people of lusty, hard-drinking, two-fisted independence—in mind when he traces Americans back to their Saxon roots. He lauded the freedom of the Germanic tribes described by Tacitus, the bold Saxons who, Jefferson wrote, "left their native wilds and woods in the North of Europe [and] . . . possessed themselves of the island of Britain." This eventually led him into a lengthy and unhelpful discussion of the differences between Saxon laws of landholding (of which he approved) and Norman laws on the subject (of which he did not).

What is most significant about the pamphlet is its flatly militant tone. As Pauline Maier puts it, "Because Jefferson refused to be constrained by the conventions of British politics, including that which insisted 'the king can do no wrong,' *A Summary View* became the first sustained piece of American political writing that subjected the King's conduct to direct and pointed criticism."

We should leave behind our "expressions of servility," Jefferson contended, and show the king we are not seeking his favors but reminding him of our rights. He ended with an absolute statement: "the god who gave us life, gave us liberty at the same time." In other words, to reduce American freedom was to challenge God. Underscoring the new brasher attitude toward the British monarch, the forty-four-page pamphlet was printed with a quotation from Cicero on its title page about the duty of the "supreme magistrate" to respect the rights of the people.

Looking back on the document decades later, Jefferson opined that its "only merit was in being the first publication which carried the claim of our rights their whole length." But that in itself was quite an achievement, as he surely knew. When he traveled to Philadelphia for the Congress, he attracted attention. "Yesterday the famous Mr. Jefferson a Delegate from Virginia . . . arrived," Rhode Island's Samuel Ward wrote in a letter to his brother. "He looks like a very sensible spirited fine Fellow, and by the pamphlet which he wrote last summer he certainly is one."

A Congress of the Continent

AT THE NORTHERN END OF THE AMERICAN COLONIES AT ABOUT THE same time, Jonathan Sewall (Harvard, 1748), a strong Tory who was a close friend of John Adams, met him at a court session in the town of Falmouth (now Portland), Maine, then a district of Massachusetts. Sewall asked Adams to go for a walk with him. They strolled out to Munjoy Hill, at the eastern end of the city, offering

a fine vista of Casco Bay and beyond, to the cold blue waters of the North Atlantic. Sewall had an urgent request for Adams. Hearing that his old friend had been chosen as a delegate to the Continental Congress, he begged Adams not to go. The irresistible power of Britain will surely crush the American movement, Sewall argued. No, Adams replied, I must go. "The die was now cast; I had passed the Rubicon; swim or sink, live or die, survive or perish with my country, was my unalterable determination."

Adams left Boston in mid-August 1774 for that congressional meeting in Philadelphia, to be held in September and October. It was his first journey outside New England. En route, in Princeton, New Jersey, he attended a sermon by John Witherspoon on Sunday, August 28. "A clear, sensible, Preacher," he told his diary. The same day, he heard about some of the eloquent Virginians he would meet. One of the New York delegates told him that "the Virginians speak in Raptures about Richard Henry Lee and Patrick Henry—one the Cicero and the other the Demosthenes of the Age."

From his home in the Virginia Piedmont, James Madison was watching political developments at a distance. Writing to his friend William Bradford in Philadelphia, Madison warned that we should not "presume too much on the generosity & Justice of the crown." Rather he said, it was "advisable as soon as possible to begin our defence." He was right—a rupture was looming. In October, in a document known as the "Continental Association," the Congress agreed, "under the sacred ties of Virtue, Honour, and Love of our Country," once again to boycott British goods.

At that first Congress, Joseph Galloway of Pennsylvania, a political ally of Benjamin Franklin, proposed that the colonies remain part of the empire, with a colonial parliament and a leader appointed by the king. (Franklin had suggested something similar twenty years earlier, in response to the outbreak of the French and Indian War.) The proposal was rejected, and Galloway, opposed to independence, departed the Congress. A few years later he would become the Loyalist governor of British-occupied Philadelphia.

Into War

EVENTS BEGAN TO ACCELERATE EARLY IN 1775. THE PRINCIPLES OF THE Revolution, Adams wrote in February of that year, were that all men are equal, and that power is delegated to leaders by the people. These, he continued, "are the principles of Aristotle and Plato, of Livy and Cicero, of Sydney, Harrington and Lock." Ancient precedent showed, Adams argued, that the British did not enjoy natural authority over the Americans. "The Greeks planted colonies, and neither demanded nor pretended any authority over them, but they became distinct independent commonwealths."

In March 1775, Patrick Henry rose to speak in Richmond. He concluded by shouting "Give me liberty—or give me death." To ensure his audience grasped the allusion to Cato, he thrust an ivory letter opener toward his chest, in imitation of a scene in Addison's play.

Many in Britain warned that King George and his allies were on the wrong course, that a confrontation with the Americans would not end well. In January, William Pitt the Elder, a former prime minister, rose in the House of Lords to support a motion to pull British troops out of Boston. "I have read Thucydides, . . . but I must declare and avow that for solidity of reasoning, force of sagacity, and wisdom of conclusion, . . . no nation or body of men can stand in preference to the general congress of Philadelphia."

Brushing aside such admonitions, the British Parliament weeks later declared the colony of Massachusetts to be in a state of rebellion. When one side in a conflict declares war, common sense would say that a state of war exists. By that reasoning, the American Revolution began then, in February 1775, rather than sixteen months later, when the Second Continental Congress announced to the world its recognition of the fact of war.

News of the battles of Concord and Lexington on April 19, 1775, struck the colonies like lightning. Washington saw his choice clearly and cast it in terms true to the central role that "virtue" played in his life. "Unhappy it is though to reflect, that a Brother's

Sword has been sheathed in a Brother's breast, and that, the once happy and peaceful plains of America are either to be drenched with Blood, or Inhabited by Slaves. Sad alternative! But can a virtuous Man hesitate in his choice?"

Washington had been a respected member of the House of Burgesses, but not a particularly active one. One reason for his quiescence was that military affairs had been more the province of London than of Williamsburg. But when the Second Continental Congress convened in May 1775, its members looked around and saw few men with martial experience. One, sitting among them, pointedly wearing his old militia uniform, was Colonel George Washington of Virginia. He soon was asked to sit on one committee to raise an army, and on another to finance it.

Boston needed defense. John Adams proposed Washington to lead it. Choosing a Virginian to lead the task would make it a national effort, rather than a regional one, Adams explained. His cousin, Samuel Adams, also of Massachusetts, seconded the idea. The vote was unanimous. Washington was to become, in his physical presence, the embodiment of the national defense, quite literally. He was, at first, the sole member of the United States Army.

In mid-June he rose in Philadelphia to accept the post. He spoke of his honor and reputation, the two most valuable things in his life:

> *Mister President, Tho' I am truly sensible of the high Honour done me in this Appointment, yet I feel great distress, from a consciousness that my abilities & Military experience may not be equal to the extensive & important Trust: . . . But lest some unlucky event should happen unfavourable to my reputation, I beg it may be rememberd by every Gentleman in the room, that I this day declare with the utmost sincerity, I do not think my self equal to the Command I am honoured with.*

He had just been given command of a nearly nonexistent army whose mission was to take on the world's greatest military power. There was no American navy. Yet he had a significant asset that

was invisible. At forty-three years old, he was seasoned enough to command the new army, yet still young enough to learn and change as he did.

In Massachusetts the very next day, British redcoats charged up a slope against American militiamen who had dug quick fortifications on two elevations just to the north of Boston harbor. Bunker Hill and Breed's Hill were located on a peninsula, so the British could have easily used boats to maneuver their forces around them, cutting off the militiamen and letting them wither on the vine. Their ships' cannons then could pound the colonials at will. Instead, British commanders chose to order a frontal attack, apparently in the belief that their men could easily rout the untested Americans. It proved a far tougher fight. The British took the hills, but at a very high price. Their casualty rate of about 50 percent resembled those of Braddock's some twenty years earlier. General William Howe's entire staff was killed or wounded, and a total of nearly one hundred officers were lost.

Slaves Can Revolt, Too

ON AUGUST 18, 1775, AN EVENT OCCURRED THAT MIGHT HAVE GIVEN SOME perceptive men pause. Thomas Jeremiah, a free man of color, a successful harbor pilot, and probably the wealthiest African American in the colonies, was hanged in South Carolina for allegedly working to support an insurrection of African Americans. "His whole life was a refutation of whites' basic justification for slavery, which was that Africans, by their nature, deserved to be slaves," concludes one modern historian.

Slave rebellion was the great fear of the South, and the British contemplated taking advantage of it. Rumors spread that Lord Dunmore, the British governor of Virginia, planned to offer freedom to enslaved people who would fight for his side. "It is imagined our Governor has been tampering with the Slaves & that he

has it in contemplation to make great Use of them in case of a civil war in this province," a worried James Madison wrote to a friend. He saw this as the great weak point of the American position. "To say the truth, that is the only part in which this Colony is vulnerable; & if we should be subdued, we shall fall like Achilles by the hand of one that knows that secret."

Later that year Dunmore indeed issued a royal proclamation declaring martial law and promising freedom to slaves who joined the royal forces. This concern about freeing the slaves, concludes the historian Jill Lepore, was the factor that, more than the issues of taxation and representation, or the fighting in Massachusetts, "tipped the scales in favor of American independence." Washington, learning about the proclamation from his encampment outside Boston, was alarmed. "That Arch Traitor to the Rights of Humanity, Lord Dunmore, should be instantly crushd," he warned, without irony. "Otherwise, like a snow Ball in rolling, his army will get size."

Parliament declared the American colonies to be in a state of "open and avowed rebellion" and vowed "to bring the traitors to justice." King George followed that up with a speech in which he accused the American rebels of engaging in a "desperate conspiracy."

Adams, meditating on the turn of events, and spurred especially by an act of treason against the Americans, concluded that the outcome depended on whether the Americans were sufficiently virtuous. He wrote to a former law student of his that "Virtue, my young Friend, Virtue alone is or can be the Foundation of our new Governments, and it must be encouraged by Rewards, in every Department civil and military." He returned to the thought six months later, writing to his friend Mercy Otis Warren that

> *Public Virtue cannot exist in a Nation without private, and public Virtue is the only Foundation of Republics. There must be a possitive Passion for the public good, the public Interest, Honour, Power, and Glory, established in the Minds of the People, or there can be*

no Republican Government, nor any real Liberty. And this public Passion must be Superiour to all private Passions.

This was about as succinct an example as exists of the influence of the classical model on the thinking of the Revolutionary generation. That model soon would be tested as the war intensified and spread.