



JOHN QUINCY ADAMS AND AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY IN A REVOLUTIONARY ERA

By Charles Edel

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John Quincy Adams famously proclaimed “America goes not abroad, in search of monsters to destroy” in a speech that has been quoted ever since to justify noninterference by the United States in the affairs of other nations.¹ However Adams was not warning future presidents away from helping aspiring democrats, but rather giving his successors a lesson in the messiness of foreign policy and the necessary trade-offs it demands.

There are three powerful lessons that President Obama might take from a careful look at Adams' foreign policy. First, that embracing American power means being as conscious of its limits as of its reach. Second, that America should be very careful about involving itself in foreign revolutions. And, third, that America should advocate change, but not upheaval.

Adams argued that embracing American power meant being conscious of its limits as well as its reach. He knew that defining American power as limitless could paradoxically limit American power and therefore consistently worked to scale back overly broad U.S. commitments. This is particularly important today as the country weighs its commitments and force structure around the world. An America that is equally committed to projecting its power everywhere limits its ability to do so effectively and decisively. This principle is best expressed by Adams's equal commitment to aggression and restraint in matters of foreign policy. During his tenure as Secretary of State, he worked to expand America's territorial and commercial interests, while limiting its commitments abroad.

A quick reminder of what North America looked like when Adams became the Secretary of State. In a word: Hostile. In every direction, foreign powers bordered the United States. To the north, the British controlled Canada and, in the wake of the War of 1812, had engaged in a naval buildup on the Great Lakes. Spain's gradual loss of power, both in Europe and in the Western Hemisphere, led to even greater challenges as Spain held the key to determining the western border of the United States. While America had paid France for the Louisiana territory in 1803, the Spanish had disputed its extent and boundaries ever since. In Florida, the Spanish Governor could not control his own territory—leaving it open to pirates, runaway slaves, and the increasingly hostile Creek Indians. Even further south, revolutions in Spain's former colonies raised the prospect of Spanish or French intervention. As if this were not challenge enough, Russia was increasingly eyeing the Pacific Northwest.

Adams worked to establish a preponderance of power on the North American continent. As Adams attempted to expand U.S. borders, he worked to push Spanish, Russian, and British interests out of, or nearly out of, North America and project American power all the way to the Pacific.

¹ John Quincy Adams, *An Address Delivered At the request of a Committee of the Citizens of Washington; On the Occasion of Reading The Declaration of Independence on the Fourth of July, 1821*, (Washington: Davis and Force, 1821), p. 29.

But if creating a preponderance of power in North America sometimes required aggression, it also demanded the justification of restraint. Anxious to slow American involvement in European and South American affairs and hoping to blunt a growing chorus of domestic and international critics advocating a more activist foreign policy, Adams gave his famous Fourth of July address in 1821. This is the speech where Adams famously proclaimed that “America goes not abroad, in search of monsters to destroy.”² To Adams the speech provided a platform to lay out his strategy of demarcating America’s limitations, lest its intentions outstrip its capabilities. By over-committing itself to foreign wars, Adams argued that the country would pervert its mission of promoting liberty. How could a country promote political freedom, Adams wondered, if it were doing so through the barrel of a gun? How would the republic continue extending its dominion westward if it were depleting its energy abroad?

This of course leads to Adams’s Second Lesson—that America should be very careful about involving itself in foreign revolutions. In the fight between liberty and oppression, there was no doubt which side America supported. But Adams recognized that there was a choice between competing priorities. America could either continue to strengthen its own republican institutions, or it could rush to the aid of those around the world who claimed to act in solidarity with America’s principles. If America chose the latter course, it would have to intervene in foreign wars. This was a dangerous idea for three reasons. First, the nation would inevitably find itself dragged into vicious local battles that drained American blood and treasure and tainted American ideals. Second, intervention would offer America’s opponents an excuse to unite against the country. Finally, Adams believed it unnecessary.

This reasoning can be seen clearly in Adams’ response to three different revolutions. The French Revolution of the 1790s, the South American rebellions from Spain that began in 1810, and the Greeks revolt against the Ottoman Empire in 1821. In each of these, the draw was powerful, as all three claimed inspiration from and ideological kinship with the principles of the American Revolution. Many in the United States urged the nation to intervene on behalf of their fledgling sister republics.

On the French Revolution, Thomas Jefferson believed that “The liberty of the whole earth was depending on the contest.” Looking South to fledgling South American republics, Henry Clay saw patriots “fighting for liberty and independence--for precisely what we fought for.” Considering the Greeks, even Adams—the elder Adams that is, caught the bug, writing Jefferson that “My old imagination is kindling into a kind of missionary enthusiasm for the cause of the Greeks.” And that renowned President William Henry Harrison declared “The star-spangled banner must wave in the Aegean.”³ But, in each instance, Adams urged restraint. With regard to France, he argued that the French Revolution was not a harbinger of republican revolution or liberal government. But even for those who disagreed, Adams warned that “we cannot take part with the French Republic without uniting all of Europe against us.”⁴ He cautioned his opponents not to let their republican enthusiasm cloud their assessment of America’s interests.

The same was true thirty years later. Adams strongly disputed the claim that American intervention in either South America or in Europe would help promote the cause of republicanism. Rather, the nation “should retreat to the wall before taking to arms.” America, whose natural sympathies always lay with those striving for their own freedom, had to “withhold and restrain” its feelings as they had a “tendency to involve us in foreign wars.”⁵ In fact, Adams posited that involvement in these wars would counter the cause of freedom. For America, armed intervention “would involve herself beyond the power of extrication, in all the wars of interest and intrigue, of individual avarice, envy, and ambition, which assume the colors and usurp the standard of freedom.”⁶

² Ibid.

³ Thomas Jefferson: Jefferson to William Short, January 3, 1793. <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/jefferson/190.html>. Henry Clay: *Annals of Congress*, 15th Cong., 1st sess., March 28, 1818, p. 161; John Adams and William Henry Harrison, quoted in Myrtle Cline’s *American Attitude toward the Greek War of Independence, 1821-1828* (Atlanta: Higgins-McArthur, 1930), p. 63; 98.

⁴ John Quincy Adams, Writing as Marcellus in the *Columbian Centinel*, May 11, 1793. Worthington C. Ford ed., *Writings of John Quincy Adams, Vol. I* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1913), p. 146. All subsequent citations to the JQA’s *Writings* will appear in the form of JQA, *Writings*, I, p. 146.

⁵ John Quincy Adams, Diary 34, 1 January 1823 - 14 June 1824 (with gaps), page 166, [electronic edition]. *The Diaries of John Quincy Adams: A Digital Collection* (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 2005), <http://www.masshist.org/jqadiaries>. All subsequent citations to John Quincy Adams’s Diaries will appear in the form of JQA, Diary 34, November 22, 1823, p. 166 [electronic edition]; John Quincy Adams to Hugh Nelson, April 28, 1823. JQA, *Writings*, VII, p. 370.

⁶ JQA, *An Address...Fourth of July, 1821*, p. 29.

Moreover, Adams believed that intervention was unnecessary in promoting liberty in the long term. America had set in motion a powerful movement that would one day overpower all the tyrants of the world. “The influence of our example has unsettled all the ancient governments of Europe,” Adams wrote. “It will overthrow them all without a single exception.”⁷ He proclaimed that America’s founding principles had set in motion an inevitable revolution to the established order. But when this revolution would come, and under what circumstances it would occur, was beyond Adams’ grasp and beyond America’s power to impose.

Adam’s third major lesson was that America should advocate change, but not upheaval. The latter, Adams knew, was every bit as full of peril as it was of promise. While America would always stand opposed to autocratic governments that suppressed human liberty, America’s impulse to promote change needed to be balanced with its instinct to preserve order.

He believed this for two principle reasons. First, while he trusted in the universal appeal of republicanism—today we’d call it democracy even though that’s not entirely accurate—he did not think that it could be imposed from the outside. Adams thought that societies evolved organically and that what was appropriate for one country or culture was not necessarily applicable to another. Hence, America’s pre-revolutionary belief in equality “was founded upon an equality really existing among them, and not upon the metaphysical speculations of fanciful politicians.”⁸

Adams advised that Europe was a different case, and warned that trying to impose this kind of equality in the face of tradition, history, and culture would privilege abstract philosophy above reality. Adams cautioned against those who “think it as easy for a nation to change its government, as for a man to change his coat.”⁹ Just as he did not think Europe’s institutions could be imposed on America, Adams also believed that America’s political beliefs could not be imposed on other nations. While he supposed that it might eventually be possible for European nations to become republics, he argued that it could only be achieved by organic, indigenous movements.

Perhaps more significant, Adams worried that revolution brought radical and sudden change. In such an atmosphere, there were no guarantees that revolutions—even revolutions undertaken against autocratic states—would turn out to America’s liking. The most telling example was revolutionary France. Adams argued that “the freedom of France was not of the genuine breed. A phantom of more than gigantic form had assumed the mask and the garb of freedom, and substituted for the principles of the Declaration of Independence, anarchy within and conquest without.” Underscoring his fears of the social dislocations and violence that often followed such upheavals, Adams denigrated the French Revolution by depicting it as an attempt to spread revolution worldwide and “overthrow... all established governments.”¹⁰

Because Adams’ United States was then just a rising power on the world stage, Adams could ignore or be neutral on events in the world that did not immediately affect his country. Fast-forward almost two centuries, and it is hard to imagine the American President having such a luxury. The strategy for a rising power that needs time to grow to power is quite different from that of a power that is the anchor weight of the international system.

Yet Adams’ message speaks past his time, anticipating the democratic upheavals of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and suggesting how best to balance America’s impulse to promote change with its instinct to preserve order. And even if Adams does not provide President Obama with the exact answers, he certainly offers the president the right questions to ask. What made Adams stand out, and what makes him continue to be relevant is that he understood and promoted the idea of a long-term strategy, which involves prioritization, trade-offs and calculations.

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⁷ JQA to Charles Jared Ingersoll, June 19, 1823. JQA, *Writings*, VII, p. 488.

⁸ JQA, *Columbian Centinel*, July 9, 1791. *Writings*, I, p. 98.

⁹ JQA, *Columbian Centinel*, June 18, 1791. *Writings*, I, p. 81.

¹⁰ JQA, *Jubilee of the Constitution, A Discourse Delivered at the Request of The New York Historical Society, in the city of New York, on Tuesday, the 30th of April 1830* (New York: Samuel Colman, 1839), p. 86.