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JOHN ADAMS' CRISIS OF CONSCIENCE

BY PETER SHAW

Mr. Shaw teaches English at SUNY, Stonybrook

WHEN John Adams complained in old age that the history of the Revolution would never be written, his words applied with particular aptness to the period between 1761 and 1776. Once Independence was declared, participants began to keep records of all kinds with an eye to history, but in the uncertain years before 1776 much that later became of interest was either not recorded or not preserved. Ironically enough, though Adams worried about being overlooked in accounts of the early part of the Revolutionary story, and though his own records were among the most circumstantial and complete, they, too, left unanswered questions about the period before 1776.

It is not clear, for example, exactly when and how Adams attached himself to the patriot movement. He protested the Stamp Act in 1765, to be sure, but then appears to have either subsided into inactivity or actually to have grown disenchanted with the patriot party. Between 1766, when the Stamp Act was repealed, and 1768, when the Townshend duties renewed widespread opposition to England, Adams stopped keeping his normally thorough diary; and, where ordinarily his letter book would have been filled with his regular correspondence, he wrote virtually no personal or business letters. The mystery of his state of mind during this period—something he never cleared up in all his voluminous reminiscences—throws light on the vicissitudes of patriotism in the years before Independence.

In order to penetrate that mystery, it is necessary to understand Adams' relationships with two men, one a patriot and the other a government official. These were James Otis Jr., the fiery orator and con-

troversialist, and Thomas Hutchinson, lieutenant governor and later governor of the Massachusetts Bay colony. Adams decided to become a lawyer partly out of admiration for Otis, his elder by ten years, and a leading figure among the lawyers of Massachusetts. During Adams' two years of legal study in Worcester, Massachusetts, his teacher held up Otis as "by far the most able, manly and commanding Character of his Age at the Bar."¹ On several counts Otis offered an ideal figure for emulation. Like Adams he came from a farm village and a family that rose from humble beginnings to financial security and local prominence. His father, Colonel Otis, practiced the same trade as Deacon Adams, that of cordwainer, or shoemaker, then went into business, on to local politics, and finally into province politics. The Colonel married well, had three sons, and sent his oldest, James Jr., to Harvard college. Deacon Adams also grew prominent in local though never in province politics, while remaining a cordwainer and farmer. He too married well, had three sons, and sent his oldest, John Adams, to Harvard college.

The older sons from both families were plump, studious, high-minded, and self-righteous. Each bore his father's name and the family honor with self-conscious earnestness. Adams, who became friendly with Otis after passing the bar, started slowly as a lawyer in the late 1750s, emerging into success only about the time that Otis delivered his argument in the Writs of Assistance case. By then he regarded himself as Otis's "pupil."²

In 1760 and 1761 a feud broke out between the Otis and Hutchinson families. James Otis's father expected an appointment to the Massachusetts Superior Court on the death of its chief justice late in 1760. However, there was no room left for him after Thomas Hutchinson was appointed as the new chief justice. James Otis Jr. thereupon commenced a newspaper and legislative campaign against Hutchinson and his government party. At the time, many regarded Otis's resentment on behalf of his father as the chief source of the patriot movement. To be friendly to James Otis and his ideas in the 1760s came to mean being friendly to the nascent patriot movement; above all, it required defining one's connection to the movement in terms of Thomas Hutchinson.

¹ John Adams to Mercy Otis Warren, 10 Sept. 1783, *Warren-Adams Letters; Being Chiefly a Correspondence among John Adams, Samuel Adams, and James Warren, 1743-1814*, 2 vols., *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society* 72-73 (1917, 1925), 2:224. *Diary and Autobiography of John Adams*, ed. L. H. Butterfield et al., 4 vols. (New York: Atheneum, 1964), 3: 275.

² *The Works of John Adams, Second President of the United States . . .*, ed. Charles Francis Adams, 10 vols. (Boston, 1856), 4: 6.

Otis's first public, though indirect confrontation with Hutchinson took place in the Superior Court early in 1761 when Otis argued there against Writs of Assistance. The writs were open search warrants that permitted customs officers to enter warehouses and homes suspected of harboring smuggled goods. By challenging the constitutionality of the writs, Otis made the issue of British revenue measures into a potentially revolutionary matter.

The Adams who attended the Writs case was a somewhat dreamy young lawyer still in search of himself. As he sat taking notes on the arguments, he hardly displayed the ambitiousness that he frequently confessed to in his diary. There he dreamed of a "leap into fame": a single grand stroke of brilliance by which he would at once serve the cause of mankind and make himself prominent in Massachusetts. Now, as he listened, Otis made just such a gesture with his address to the court, which was learned, passionate, self-sacrificing yet self-advertising. "His exertions on this single occasion," Adams later remarked, "secured him a commanding popularity" which "never deserted him."³

Above all, Adams viewed Otis's speech as a defiance of authority: not simply of the crown and Parliament, but even more dramatically of Otis's mentor. This was the lawyer for the crown against whom Otis argued: Jeremiah Gridley, his former teacher and the leading figure at the Massachusetts bar. For Adams, recalling the Writs case nearly fifty years later, Otis's struggle with Gridley offered "a moral spectacle more affecting to me than any I have since seen upon any stage," for it amounted to "a pupil treating his master with all the deference, respect, esteem, and affection of a son to a father, and that without the least affectation; while he baffled and confounded all his authorities, and confuted all his arguments and reduced them to silence." In his retrospective dramatization, Adams had forgotten that not Otis but Gridley prevailed in the Writs case.⁴

By making the Writs case a struggle between responsibly daring youth and appreciative authority Adams translated it into a version of his personal myth. For Adams' own confrontations with authority imitated his relationship with his father as surely as Otis's did with his. Characteristically, Adams asserted his independence, as when he defied his

³ John Adams to Hezekiah Niles, 14 Jan. 1818, *ibid.*, 10: 276.

⁴ John Adams to William Tudor, 9 July 1818, *ibid.*, 10: 327. Adams remembered the case as never being settled when actually the writs were upheld after being confirmed in England as acceptable practice. See Maurice H. Smith, *The Writs of Assistance Case* (Berkeley, 1978), 507.

father's wish that he become a minister rather than a lawyer, but did so with a measure of respect. Afterwards he expected approval of his principled acts. Thus it was not surprising when he wrote that at the Writs case, "Mr. Gridley himself seemed to me to exult inwardly at the glory and triumph of his pupil." Some years earlier when Adams came to Boston to be examined for the bar, then an informal procedure, he first presented himself at Gridley's house rather than at some lesser attorney's. Gridley tested Adams. Then, impressed with the young man's answers, he offered him advice on further studies and his future as a lawyer. This Gridley did, Adams wrote, "with the benignity of a parent in his Countenance."

Adams went next to Otis who "received me more like a Brother than a father."⁵ On this occasion Otis displayed his particular kind of defiance of authority. Wholly ignorant of accepted procedure, Adams had come to Boston without a letter of introduction or any clear idea of how to gain admittance to the bar. Otis, contrary to accepted practice and what was considered good manners, told Adams that he need not bother with further calls on members of the bar. This was, of course, characteristically to advise against paying deference to authority—something that fell in with Adams' proclivity for independence.

At the same time as the aged Adams made the Writs case into a filial drama of defiance he described a national drama that explained how Otis's argument gave birth to American Independence. Independence itself, it developed, had filial overtones. Here Adams shifted his focus to Thomas Hutchinson, the new chief justice. Adams "supposed" that Hutchinson had arranged the physical setting of the trial so as to overawe defiance of authority. He had introduced a new "scenery" of judicial "scarlet and sable robes, of broad bands, and enormous tie wigs" in order to lend a "theatrical," overbearing aspect to himself and the four judges who sat with him. In addition "all the barristers at law of Boston, and of the neighboring county of Middlesex" were present and dressed "in gowns, bands, and tie wigs," while "two portraits, at more than full length, of King Charles the Second and of King James the Second [both of whom were famous for asserting the royal authority],

⁵ John Adams to William Tudor, 6 Aug. 1818, *Works of John Adams*, 10: 343. *Diary and Autobiography of John Adams*, 3: 272, 273. See Robert M. Zemsky, *Merchants, Farmers, and River Gods: An Essay on Eighteenth Century American Politics* (Boston, 1971), 81-82 on Adams' entry into the legal profession. On going to see Otis compare *Diary and Autobiography of John Adams*, 1: 56.

in splendid golden frames, were hung up on the most conspicuous sides of the apartment." Adams emphasized that these were particularly imposing paintings of the highest excellence, and that they had been taken out of storage, "cleaned, superbly framed, and placed in council" by the new governor, Bernard, "no doubt with the advice and concurrence of Hutchinson."⁶

In this setting Otis spent several hours going through the Acts of Parliament that related to the colonies. His speech amounted to a diatribe on British attempts to hold down American growth. Otis listed a century of restrictive acts and "alternately laughed and raged against them all." England had imposed a "selfish, partial, arbitrary, and contracted system of parliamentary regulations in America" and Otis verged on asserting what Adams believed to be the incontrovertible case: that Parliament had no right whatever to legislate for America. Adams summed up Otis's recital of Parliament's restrictions on America with a familial comparison of his own:

Such were the bowels of compassion, such the tender mercies of our pious, virtuous, our moral and religious mother country towards her most dutiful and affectionate children!

Adams' famous dictum that the Revolution took place in the minds and hearts of the people followed immediately after this account and referred especially to Otis's speech, to which Adams traced the entire Revolutionary process. Again using the familial analogy, he specified what he meant by "Minds" and by "Hearts." Where the people once had prayed for "the King and Queen and all the Royal Family, and all in Authority under them," they gradually changed their minds until, when they saw themselves abandoned by these "Powers" they found themselves praying for their own governments. Where they originally felt "an habitual Affection for England as their Mother-Country," their hearts' feelings altered upon discovering that she was "a cruel Beldam, willing, like Lady Macbeth, to 'dash their brains out.'" It was no wonder if their "filial Affections" were changed into "Indignation and horror." Thus did Adams link together three filial dramas: Otis's defiance of Gridley, Otis's resentment at the king, and the subsequent change in people's attitudes to king and "mother country." Later, when

⁶ John Adams to William Tudor, 18 Dec. 1816, *Works of John Adams*, 10: 233. *Diary and Autobiography of John Adams*, 3: 276. John Adams to William Tudor, 29 March 1817, *Works of John Adams*, 10: 245.

Independence was declared, Adams bid, "Farewell! farewell, infatuated, besotted Stepdame."⁷

For Adams the Writs case involved yet one more drama, this one personal. All his life he somewhat questionably dated his own Revolutionary services from 1761, the year of the writs. Yet in justice he did not emerge as a patriot until the Stamp Act in 1765 nor gain real prominence until the First Continental Congress in 1774. However, 1761 marked a psychic turning point in Adams' life. It was the year of his father's death, and in his recollections he always regarded it as marking his own emergence into maturity—into independence, one might say. His claim that at the Writs case "the child Independence was born" may have been an exaggeration about history, but together with his pronouncement that "the seeds of patriots were then and there sown," it manifestly applied to himself.⁸

Along with his Revolutionary services Adams mistakenly placed other of his early achievements in 1761, including two that bore on the Writs case. These errors point to the roles played by Otis and Hutchinson in his birth as a revolutionary. First, Adams thought that he had attended the case as a barrister (a lawyer certified to argue before the Superior Court), and second, he thought that Hutchinson had introduced the scarlet and sable robes for barristers on that occasion. In fact, both his own elevation to barrister and the introduction of robes in the court took place in the following year, 1762. By shifting these two memories to 1761 Adams as it were made himself into both a participant in Otis's drama and a charter anti-Hutchinsonian. It seems evident that here and elsewhere Adams chose the patriot Otis as model for his adult identity. At the same time, in every possible way Adams viewed Hutchinson as the father-like, evil genius presiding over Massachusetts politics. Hutchinson was challenged by a symbolic son, Otis, whom he destroyed. But he would not succeed in the same way with another symbolic son then coming of age: John Adams would overthrow, not be cut down.⁹

Unlike Otis, Adams did not transfer resentment of his father to

⁷ John Adams to William Tudor, 21 Aug. 1818, *ibid.*, 10: 350. John Adams to Hezekiah Niles, 13 Feb. 1818, L. H. Butterfield, "John Adams: What Do We Mean By the American Revolution?" in Daniel J. Boorstin, *An American Primer* (Chicago, 1966), 229-230. John Adams to Abigail Adams, 15 July 1776, *Adams Family Correspondence*, ed. L. H. Butterfield et al. (New York: Atheneum, 1965-), 2: 49.

⁸ John Adams to William Tudor, 29 March 1817, *Works of John Adams*, 10: 247-248.

⁹ Peter Shaw, *The Character of John Adams* (Chapel Hill, 1976), 45-46, 46n.

Hutchinson. As his ascription of kindly feelings to Jeremiah Gridley suggested, Adams had a loving father whom he revered and admired. In his imagination, however, Adams gave his father the role of moral judge. On the one occasion when Adams invented a fictional father in one of his writings, that figure warned his son against ambition and pledged him to high-minded public service. In contrast, when Adams depicted Hutchinson he repeatedly asserted that the key to his character was "unbounded ambition."¹⁰ Thus where Thomas Hutchinson represented for Otis the distasteful side of his father, for Adams he represented that which his father had warned against.

However, since Adams lacked Otis' clear motive for his dislike, it is difficult to pinpoint when he turned against Hutchinson. The aged Adams did not depict Hutchinson as a particularly evil figure at the Writs trial. In recalling the Otis-Hutchinson feud over the Chief Justiceship, it is true, Adams wrote in 1818:

A more deliberate, cool, studied, corrupt appointment never was made than that of Hutchinson to be Chief Justice. It was done for the direct purpose of enslaving this whole continent, and, consequently, Britain and man; and, if Otis did say he would set the province in a flame, it was one of the sublimest expressions that was ever uttered, and he ought to have a statue of adamant erected in honor of it.¹¹

But it was only in retrospect that Adams had come to believe in Hutchinson's appointment as a means to insure a verdict favorable to the Crown in the Writs of Assistance case. The affair came to appear as a part of "a black conspiracy against the liberties both of the new & the old world" only when the facts had faded from memory.¹²

Nevertheless, the appointment of Hutchinson as Chief Justice may have represented a turning point for Adams as well as Otis. Previous to it, according to Hutchinson's close friend, Peter Oliver, a paternal Hutchinson had smiled on Adams just as he had on Otis. "Whilst he was young at the Bar," Oliver wrote of Adams,

¹⁰ See Shaw, *Character of John Adams*, 51. *Diary and Autobiography of John Adams*, 2: 55.

¹¹ John Adams to William Tudor, 11 Mar. 1818, *Works of John Adams*, 10: 298.

¹² John Adams to William Tudor, 17 Dec. 1816, Adams Papers Microfilm, *Massachusetts Historical Society*, Reel 123. See also Josiah Quincy, Jr., *Reports of Cases . . .*, ed. Samuel M. Quincy (New York, 1865, rpt. New York, 1969), 411n. Smith, *Writs of Assistance Case*, 147 has recently speculated that Adams may have been right about the reason for Hutchinson's appointment. But compare Emily Hickman, "Colonial Writs of Assistance," *New England Quarterly* 5(1932): 84-85.

he behaved with great Modesty; & as it is a general Misfortune incident to Gentlemen of the Bar, to brow beat their Inferiors, so when any of his Seniors took Advantage of him in this Way, the chief Justice Mr. Hutchinson would, with his usual Humanity, support him, as well as show him other Marks of Respect, out of Court.

When the chief justiceship came open, Adams partly drafted an essay calling for the appointment of a legal expert—someone who, unlike Hutchinson or Colonel Otis, had not spent his youth “in Husbandry Merchandize, Politicks.” Though Adams did not record his reaction when Hutchinson received the appointment, Bernard Bailyn has speculated on the result. “Adams,” Bailyn writes:

never forgot the outrage he felt at this elevation of a layman to the chief justiceship, so thwarting, insulting, and humiliating to his excruciatingly sensitive self-esteem. For years the appointment would provide him with an invaluable psychological device for handling impediments to his passionate ambitions. An appointment so unmerited, so perverse, and so unjust to those like himself who were sacrificing their lives to the law could only be the result of dangerous, secret forces whose power would no doubt otherwise be felt and that would otherwise block the aspirations of powerless but honest and able new men.¹³

A few months after the Writs of Assistance case, however, Adams admonished himself for “Swearing” and “Virulence” with regard to the characters of several contemporaries, among them Hutchinson. Unfortunately, he did not reveal what he had said about them. As late as 1763, during the “¼ of an Hour with Lt. Govr. Hutchinson” that Adams spent one day, he betrayed no personal animus. Adams, Hutchinson, and lawyer Goldthwait discussed province history, and Hutchinson alluded to patriot politics in a neutral manner. “This to be sure was Familiarity and Affability!” wrote Adams in his diary, with an uncertain but apparently ironical meaning in his exclamation point. Yet, given Adam’s usual explicitness when he suspected the motives of others, he appears not to have meant anything positively sinister here.¹⁴

¹³ *Peter Oliver’s Origin and Progress of the American Rebellion: A Tory View*, ed. Douglass Adair and John A. Schutz (San Marino, California, 1961), 83. *Diary and Autobiography of John Adams*, 1: 167-168. Bernard Bailyn, *The Ordeal of Thomas Hutchinson* (Cambridge, Mass., 1974), 51.

¹⁴ *Diary and Autobiography of John Adams*, 1: 218, 232-233.

At this period the Otis-Hutchinson feud was at its height, and Adams appears to have been troubled by it. When his close friend Jonathan Sewall ridiculed Otis as "Bluster," Adams responded with a series of newspaper articles calling for more civility of discourse. In the meantime, in an abusive, almost hysterical, unsent letter to Sewall Adams attacked him for "satirizing and execrating one side," that of Otis, when really "both Parties deserve Curses." But within a few months Adams inexplicably switched his pseudonym, his newspaper, and his position away from the anti-government and anti-Hutchinson side, and went so far as to defend Sewall. Adams' uncertainty about which party and which friends to join was to resurface more than once before the Revolution.¹⁵

Not until the Stamp Act did Adams clearly show an animus toward Hutchinson. With James Otis he was shocked by the first Stamp Act riot, with its destruction of furniture and windows at the house of Andrew Oliver on August 14th, 1765. The "blind, undistinguishing Rage of the Rabble," Adams wrote, had made "a very atrocious Violation of the Peace" which was "of dangerous Tendency and Consequence." Nevertheless, in the twelve day interim before the attack on Hutchinson's house Adams blamed Hutchinson for the disturbances. In what has come to stand as the definitive patriot statement on plural office holding, Adams listed Hutchinson's appointive positions along with those he had secured for relatives. Was not the potential "Tyranny" of these arrangements, Adams asked rhetorically, "enough to excite Jealousies among the People?" In effect, Hutchinson, like Sewall, had contributed to the strained atmosphere of the times by his constant endeavors "to scatter Party Principles."¹⁶

When Hutchinson's house was destroyed by a second Stamp Act mob twelve days after the first, Adams was silent. He later protested his disapproval of the event, but he manifested no such shock as at the lesser violence done to Oliver's property. Soon, patriot manoeuvring against the revenue stamps effectively kept them from being put into circulation, and one effect of their success was the closing of the courts, where legal documents could not be used without stamps. The patriot lawyers in Massachusetts agitated to have the courts proceed without

¹⁵ *Papers of John Adams*, ed. Robert J. Taylor et al., 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass., 1977), 1: 63. For an analysis of Adams' ambivalence in 1763 see Robert A. East, "The Strange Pause in John Adams's Diary," in *Toward a New View of America: Essays in Honor of Arthur C. Cole*, Hans L. Trefousse, ed. (New York, 1977).

¹⁶ *Diary and Autobiography of John Adams*, 1: 260, 281.

the stamps so that they could return to business. When Hutchinson resisted their attempts to reopen the courts Adams was particularly outraged—not the least because he was being deprived of his livelihood. Early in 1766 Adams complained in his diary: “Times are terrible and made so at present by Hutchinson Chief Justice.” Soon afterward, however, at repeal of the Stamp Act Adams relented in his anger. “I once thought,” he reported saying of Hutchinson to Deacon Webb at tea, “that his Death in a natural Way would have been the most joyful News to me that I could have heard.” But now he “hoped I was mistaken in my Judgment.”¹⁷

Adams particularly welcomed the atmosphere of conciliation which seemed to issue forth from a “gracious” king, and it was his fervent wish to return to “the Kings Protection.” As he reviewed the effects of the Stamp Act, Adams’ mollified but cool feelings toward Hutchinson stood in sharp contrast with his enthusiasm for the king. It was true, he admitted, that Hutchinson’s house had been “pull’d down.” But the Hutchinson riot was not the first in New England, and it no more deserved to be called “high Treason” than any of its antecedents. As for the king, Adams asked:

has there been a disrespectful Speech uttered of his Majesty or his Government, thro the whole memorable Year 1765, even at Midnight? over the Bowl or the Bottle—I believe not one.

It was at this point that Adams stopped keeping his diary and to a great extent withdrew from politics. After repeal of the Stamp Act, he labored to separate himself from the passions of party. In his Autobiography he recalled that, “I was solicited to go to the Town Meetings and harrangue there. This I constantly refused.”¹⁸ Not until 1768, after the Townshend duties had revived the old anti-Stamp Act sentiment, did he emerge again in opposition.

During his period of silence, except for random diary jottings and some perfunctory private letters, Adams wrote on one subject only: Jonathan Sewall’s published defenses of Governor Bernard and his administration. At the beginning of Adams’ legal career, Sewall, who was his elder by seven years, had sought out, praised, and cultivated friendship with his young colleague (something Adams incorrectly remembered having taken place in the significant year, 1761). In addition, he

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 1: 305, 308, 311, 324. Brackets supplied by The Adams Papers editors have been omitted, and an abbreviation has been expanded (p. 311).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 1: 323, 292, 291; and 3: 290-291.

and Sewall had been treated by Otis as his "sons." Then came Adams' discomfiture over Otis and Sewall in 1763, at which time he had left a similar gap in his diary, but which he later forgot. Looking back on his relationship with Sewall, Adams recalled his friends' having possessed "a lively Wit, a pleasing humour, a brilliant Imagination," and he added: "I know not that I have ever delighted more in the friendship of any Man, or more deeply regretted an irreconcilable difference in Judgment in public Opinions."¹⁹ Adams' replies to Sewall in 1767 and 1768, some of them published, and others too intemperate to be sent to the newspapers, reflect his anxiety over the permanent wedge being driven between them at that time.

Most surprisingly for Adams, instead of employing his usual scholarly and exhaustive style of argumentation, he resorted for the most part to denunciation. Writing in a country dialect as "Humphrey Plough-jogger," Adams attacked the also pseudonymous Sewall as "a most crazy." In another, unpublished, article Adams ignored Sewall's rather persuasive arguments. After quoting these at length, he compared their author to "King Lear in the cold Storm" and asked his readers, "is this fellow Mad, or drunk?" In yet another unpublished essay Adams composed a soliloquy for Sewall in which, like a character in a Mercy Otis Warren play, he confesses his insane ambition to be advanced by Bernard and Hutchinson.²⁰

These writings appear to have reflected Adams' distressed state of mind at the time. He abhorred Sewall's side in the conflict but he feared the results if he should let himself become further involved. He therefore attacked Sewall, as he had Hutchinson, for supposedly exacerbating party divisions. In view of Adams' characterization of Sewall as mad, it is significant that Adams recalled always answering his friend James Warren's plea that he speak at town meetings during this period with the expression, "That way madness lies." As Adams explained it,

The Symptoms of our great Friend Otis, at that time, suggested to Warren, a sufficient comment on these Words.²¹

The frequency of breakdowns among other patriots as well as among

¹⁹ *Works of John Adams*, 4: 6. *Diary and Autobiography of John Adams*, 3: 278. On the break in Adams diary and his forgetfulness see East, "The Strange Pause," 30n.

²⁰ *Papers of John Adams*, 1: 181, 185, 189. For Sewall's arguments see Carol Berkin, *Jonathan Sewall: Odyssey of an American Loyalist* (New York and London, 1974),

31-34.

²¹ *Diary and Autobiography of John Adams*, 3: 291.

loyalists in the next few years offered a further comment on Adams' words. From 1766 to 1768, it appears, Adams attempted to remove himself from party politics, and as a result suffered in his conscience. After his reemergence, this period of suffering colored his political behavior for the remainder of the Revolutionary period.

Starting in 1768 Adams moved his family to Boston from his retreat in Braintree, and returned to political activity. He offered a hint of how he viewed his two year silence when he referred in one of his pseudonymous articles to a "long Lethargy" from which he now was "roused."²² Others were roused along with him by the impending Townshend duties, so that there was no apparent mystery to his withdrawal from affairs since the beginning of 1766. Yet Adams preceeded to make a mystery of his withdrawal period by insisting that it had never taken place. As early as 1770 he was representing himself as having been a staunch patriot throughout the 1760s, while in later life nothing so infuriated him as having his supposed involvement during this period overlooked. Thus, when in 1805 Mercy Otis Warren's *History of the Revolution* omitted his services before the 1770s, Adams wrote her an outraged series of letters insisting on his continuous involvement from 1761 to the Revolution. Given the crisis rhythm of the 1760s, with the Stamp Act in 1765 and the Townshend duties in 1768 serving to arouse opposition such as his, there was hardly any disgrace in retiring from patriot agitation at other times. His unnecessary vehemence in claiming something different therefore suggests hidden guilt.

More than one loyalist claimed that Adams underwent an ordeal of choice between the patriots and loyalists approximately during the period in question. Once again, there need have been no embarrassment about this: uncertainty and wavering were typical experiences of conscience patriots. It seems clear, though, that Adams underwent a time of doubt during which he suffered a genuine *crise de conscience*. It has been shown that patriots and loyalists alike frequently suffered from Puritan-like doubts about their "civic duty" in the troubled times before the Revolution.²³ When Adams firmly attached himself to the cause a few years later, he had good reason to try to forget his particular crisis of

²² Shaw, *Character of John Adams*, 57.

²³ Michael Kammen, "The American Revolution as a *Crise de Conscience*: The Case of New York," in *Society, Freedom, and Conscience: The American Revolution in Virginia, Massachusetts, and New York*, Richard M. Jellison, ed. (New York, 1976), 133.

doubt, which at that point might make him appear to be a backslider or potential dropout.

The patriots' raising of doubts about the legitimacy of authority led quite understandably to personal conflicts over loyalty. Unable to choose sides yet tortured by the demand for a choice, the potential revolutionary often enters "a phase of withdrawal or passive alienation from politics." Frequently this takes the form, as it did with Adams, of disappointment in the way that others have responded to the political crisis. Adams, for example, complained that American "ardor" had quickly "cooled down" after the Stamp Act crisis. What was worse, his fellow townsmen, instead of rewarding his services against the Act, had "neglected" him by failing to advance him from town office to the legislature at the next election.²⁴

With the dying down of the revolutionary's first political crisis, those who like Adams still take a reformist approach, often adopt what has been called the "innocent czar" theory to explain events. That is, they exonerate the king or czar, just as Adams and most of his fellow patriots did at the repeal of the Stamp Act, at the expense of his supposedly deceiving ministers. In Adams' case the "Arch Corrupter and Deceiver" remained Thomas Hutchinson, and it was chiefly against him that Adams proceeded to turn.²⁵ But he did so in a peculiar manner—as if he were transferring his rage at Sewall to a more prominent figure. This shift emerges from Adams' autobiographical accounts of a key incident that took place in 1769, just as he was emerging from his withdrawal.

As Adams told the story, Jonathan Sewall visited him on the orders of Governor Bernard in an attempt to lure him to the government side. When Sewall offered him the post of Deputy Advocate General of Massachusetts—Otis's old office—Adams' refusal was "very prompt." Despite Sewall's urgings Adams insisted that "time would produce no change and he had better make his report to Bernard immediately." Sewall nevertheless returned "weeks afterwards" to renew the offer, only to be told that Adams' "Judgment and Inclination and determination were unalterably fixed."²⁶

A few years later, in London, the loyalists Richard Clarke and Samuel

²⁴ David C. Schwartz, "A Theory of Revolutionary Behavior," in *When Men Revolt and Why: A Reader in Political Violence and Revolution*, James C. Davies, ed. (New York, 1971), 114. *Diary and Autobiography of John Adams*, 1: 312-313n., with "neglected" conjectured by the editors.

²⁵ John Adams to Abigail Adams, 30 June 1774, *Adams Family Correspondence*, 1: 116. Schwartz, "Revolutionary Behavior," 116.

²⁶ *Diary and Autobiography of John Adams*, 3: 288-289.

Quincy, the latter acquainted with Adams from childhood, gave a different account of the incident to Thomas Hutchinson. They had it that Adams told Sewall he "was at a loss which side to take." After Sewall's first visit, which was not accompanied by a specific offer, Sewall supposedly asked Bernard to make Adams a Justice of the Peace in exchange for his allegiance to the government party. When Bernard delayed, this account went on, Adams took offense "and ever after joined in opposition."²⁷ It hardly accords with Adams' high-mindedness that he would consider deciding his allegiance in consideration of an office, and certainly not a lowly judgeship of the sort that interested Colonel Otis.

Nevertheless, in both stories a loyalist, whether mistaken or not, is shown to have been somehow convinced that allegiance remained an open question for Adams. Though actually his uncertainty lay not between patriotism and loyalty but between patriotism and neutrality, it comes as no surprise that the administration made several attempts to win Adams over in 1768 and 1769. For his part Adams went so far in 1769 as to perform Sewall's office of Advocate General by conducting a prosecution for the government while Sewall was away. The case, in fact, was one perfectly calculated to shake Adams' patriot allegiance, for it concerned a "riot or Assault" on a customs officer, whose boat was "burned by a mob." From his disapproval of the Stamp Act "rabble" in 1765 throughout the Revolution, Adams steadily maintained his opposition to such lawlessness. Not only did he defend the British soldiers in the Boston Massacre—where fear of the mob had brought about the shooting—but in 1770 and 1771 he represented tarred and feathered victims of mobs. As late as 1774 Adams represented Richard King, a loyalist suing for damages from a mob that had broken into his house during the Stamp Act disturbances. In his summation Adams gave a vivid description of the terrors suffered by King and his family.²⁸

In the light of such expressions of conscience as these, one can see how Adams might resent any implications of backsliding.

But Adams went further than a denial of ever having had any doubts about the patriot cause. He represented the administration's attempts

²⁷ *The Diary and Letters of His Excellency Thomas Hutchinson, Esq.*, 2 vols., ed. Peter Orlando Hutchinson (Boston, 1884), 2: 220.

²⁸ See *Legal Papers of John Adams*, ed. Kinvin Wroth and Hiller B. Zobel, 3 vols. (Cambridge, Mass., 1965), 2: 103, 254, 264, 219. It is perhaps significant that Josiah Quincy, Jr., who defended the Massacre soldiers with Adams, was also engaged with him in the case of the assault on the customs officer, and that Otis was one of the attorneys opposing them.

to win him over as evidences of a conspiracy masterminded by Thomas Hutchinson. Thus, Adams went from early retrospects in which, as with the paintings in the Writs case, he *supposed* that Hutchinson lay behind the Sewall offer, to a later version in which he grew certain of Hutchinson's role, to a final version in which he recalled telling Sewall at their first interview that he could guess who was behind the offer. (When he named Hutchinson, Sewall is supposed to have "nodded assent.") Revealingly, Adams elsewhere made Hutchinson responsible for the key defections to the loyalist side of other moderates like himself. Hutchinson had "Seduced from my Bosom three of the most Amiable young Men from the cause of their Country to their own Ruin," Adams wrote, referring especially to Jonathan Sewall and Samuel Quincy (who bore the story of Adams' supposed wavering). Furthermore, in very old age Adams once asserted that Hutchinson had directly "practiced all his Arts upon me." Tantalizingly, Adams gave no details, except to say that, "my constant Answer was 'I cannot in conscience.'"²⁹

Adams' supposed constancy here was reminiscent of his putative firmness with Sewall and his "constant" refusal to harangue at town meetings. In each case his attempt to depict himself as unwavering in the cause of patriotism had the opposite effect of suggesting a personal crisis of conscience. Hutchinson's part would appear to have amounted to little more than using his "familiarity and affability" to argue the loyalist side when, as a circuit riding judge, he was thrown together with Adams and other lawyers like Sewall and Samuel Quincy. (In 1769, when Hutchinson was supposedly masterminding the Sewall offer, he actually *rejected* a proposal that Adams be offered the post of Attorney General, which was the close equivalent of Advocate General.)

The most likely cause of Adams' resentment against Hutchinson at this period was a trial in which Adams and Otis were to appear jointly before Hutchinson. Their client was a sailor who had killed a British officer while resisting impressment. "No trial," Adams later wrote, "had ever interested the community so much before."³⁰ It was expected that for his part Otis would argue constitutional principles, as he had at the Writs case. But it was at just this time that Otis's mental state began seriously to deteriorate, so that it fell to Adams to deliver the defense.

Adams labored until he had "ransacked every writer on the civil law,

²⁹ John Adams to William Tudor, 25 Nov. 1816, and John Adams to William Tudor, 16 Nov. 1816, Adams Papers, Reel 123.

³⁰ Bailyn, *Ordeal*, 151. John Adams to Jedidiah Morse, 20 Jan. 1816, *Works of John Adams*, 10: 209-210.

that the town of Boston possessed." He appeared in the courtroom with a great pile of legal works, prepared to argue, in the manner of Otis, that Parliament had no right whatsoever to impress seamen. Once again Adams in old age recalled a scene of panoply: presiding, in addition to Hutchinson as Chief Justice, were the governors of Massachusetts and New Hampshire, the judge of Admiralty, the local commander of the navy, "and councillors from several colonies, to the number of fifteen." After the preliminaries, just as Adams began to speak, Hutchinson adjourned the case. He eventually ruled in favor of Adams' client, but despite the legal victory Adams was crushed by not being allowed to deliver his speech. "Never in my whole life," he later wrote, "have I been so disappointed, so mortified, so humiliated as in that trial." An acute historian had traced to this disappointment Adams' transformation into a revolutionary.³¹ Such an analysis ignores the fact that though Adams often felt intense resentment he rarely acted on it politically. Nevertheless, it does point to the possibility that the incident represented a turning point for him.

In 1808 Adams explained Hutchinson's "secret motive" in calling an adjournment: "to prevent me from reaping an harvest of glory." (Hutchinson plausibly explained that his proceeding arose purely from a matter of law.) In 1816 Adams' recollection grew more vivid, just as it did with regard to the Sewall offer, so that Hutchinson's look as he rose to cut him off was "deeply graven on my retina." Still later Adams jokingly revealed his own intense state of anticipation as he had prepared his brief. "I vainly felt as if I could shake the town & the world," he recalled. But then:

Alas! for me, my glass bubble was burst! My Boule de Savon was dissolved! All the inflammable Gas had escaped from my Balloon and down I dropt like Gelater de Rosia.

Finally in 1817 Adams revealed exactly what kind of fame he had looked for. His plea, he wrote,

would have accelerated the Revolution more than even the impeachment of the Judges, or Hutchinson's foolish controversy about the Omniscience and Omnipotence & Infinite goodness of Parliament did afterwards. It would have spread a wider flame that Otis's ever did, or could have done.³²

³¹ *Ibid.*, 207, 205. John Adams to William Tudor, 30 Dec. 1816, Adams Papers, Reel 123. The historian is Clifford K. Shipton.

³² John Adams to John Quincy Adams, 8 Jan. 1808, Adams Papers, Reel 118. John

Through the Corbet case, in other words, Adams might have leapt into fame in the manner of Otis, and more important, he might unequivocally have certified his patriot credentials—had it not been for Hutchinson.

Adams' great concern with public opinion was evident when, two months after the Corbet case, he resumed his diary on a regular basis for the first time since 1766. In recording a ride several miles out of his way to attend a Sons of Liberty feast, he justified the detour in revealing terms. "I felt as if I ought not to lose this feast," he wrote, "as if it was my duty to be there." Why?

Jealousies arise from little Causes, and many might suspect, that I was not hearty in the Cause, if I had been absent whereas none of them are more sincere, and stedfast than I am.³³

This has the appearance of mending fences. Once again Adams was assuring himself of his consistency while taking steps to erase any lingering impression of lukewarmness left over from his period of withdrawal from politics.

Adams was given the opportunity to certify his patriot credentials within the year when, soon after Hutchinson's designation as acting governor in place of Francis Bernard, the question of Adams' allegiance arose for the last time. On the morning after the Boston Massacre Adams and Josiah Quincy Jr. were asked to serve as defense counsel for the British soldiers who had fired into the crowd. Although the patriot leadership presumably approved of their choice, in taking the case the two lawyers gave the appearance, at least at first, of being loyalist sympathizers. After thus risking their political reputations, both men quickly took steps to redeem themselves. Before the case came to trial the patriot leadership indicated its approval of Adams' course by designating him as a candidate for the legislature in replacement of Otis. Once elected, Adams took up where Otis had left off, quickly moving to the head of an opposition that challenged the new acting governor at every turn.

Adams to Jedidiah Morse, 20 Jan. 1816, *Works of John Adams*, 10: 206. John Adams to William Tudor, 30 Dec. 1816, Adams Papers, Reel 123. "Gelater de Rosia" is my conjectural reading. John Adams to William Tudor, 11 Jan. 1817, Adams Papers, Reel 123. For Hutchinson's explanation see his *The History of the Colony and Province of Massachusetts-Bay*, Lawrence Shaw Mayo, ed., 3 vols. (Cambridge, Mass., 1936), 3: 167n.

³³ *Diary and Autobiography of John Adams*, 1: 341-342. See *Papers of John Adams*, 2: 171 for a 1766 contact with the Sons of Liberty.

Adams succeeded in the legislature if not in defeating Hutchinson's purposes, then at least in making his own loyalty clear. But by the end of the legislative session of 1770-1771 the strain of battle had left him in a state of anxious exhaustion. Immediately after adjournment Adams suffered what can only be termed a nervous breakdown. He now resigned from the legislature (Otis, in a last, brief return to sanity, replaced him), and moved to his native Braintree. From here he went off to Connecticut for a mineral springs cure.

Friends ascribed Adams's intensity in the legislature to "some private pique" between himself and Hutchinson. This Adams denied. Nevertheless, he thought of his breakdown as having been caused by his opposition to Hutchinson. In the meantime, Hutchinson was elevated from acting governor to full Royal Governor of Massachusetts, and while Adams was away on his curative trip he read about Hutchinson's inauguration in June 1771. The newspapers carried the new chief executive's address at the opening of the legislative session and the legislature's "cordial answer" to it. Reading a description of the "elegant Entertainment" given that evening by Hutchinson Adams let out his fury. "With great Anxiety and Hazard," he wrote in his diary, and "with loss of Health Reputation, Profit" he had "for 10 Years together invariably opposed" Hutchinson. Now, with Hutchinson's elevation, it was as if all of this opposition were wasted. Adams' outburst revealed the intensity of his anti-Hutchinson emotion. But even more significant was the inaccuracy of his expression, "10 Years." For if he had been invariable in opposition for this length of time (i.e., since the ubiquitous year 1761) it had been for the most part in his own mind.³⁴ As Adams' breakdown and outburst revealed, his anti-Hutchinson campaign had grown at least in part out of a need to erase not only public doubt, but also a private, persistent uneasiness over his apostasy during 1766-1768.

After his recovery, much as when he blamed the loyalism of Sewall and Samuel Quincy on Hutchinson, Adams made the surprising claim that Hutchinson had "destroyed a Thatcher, a Mayhew, and Otis." There was an unintended sense in which Adams was right about Otis. But Benjamin Thatcher, Josiah Quincy Jr's teacher, had died of the after-effects of smallpox, while Jonathan Mayhew, the minister, suf-

³⁴ Only a year later Adams mistakenly dated his dispute with Hutchinson "in the Spring of the Year 1771" instead of in fall, 1770. In moving it to the time of his breakdown he revealed the association that breakdown had in his mind with Hutchinson. *Diary and Autobiography of John Adams*, 2: 53, 54, 56n. "10 years": 2: 35 (June 1771).

fered from chronic ill health and died after exerting himself in a church-related matter. Both had been deeply involved in opposition to Hutchinson, but by no stretch of the imagination had they been seriously injured by him. When Adams went on to mention his own "Constitution" as being "very infirm" he supplied the clue to his meaning: that Hutchinson destroyed patriots like himself.³⁵

When Adams returned to politics in 1773, his "hatred of Hutchinson," as Bernard Bailyn put it, "had become obsessive." In contrast, in the course of attacking Hutchinson, Adams asserted that he and the American people "humbly look up to his present Majesty . . . as children to a father." When later in the year Hutchinson's private letters were stolen and published, Adams and the other patriots were shocked by their contents. They focussed especially on the proposal for an "abridgment" of English liberties as a means of controlling the unruly atmosphere in the streets of Boston.³⁶

Early in 1774 Adams wrote a diary meditation on the letters in which he declared: "Examples ought to be made of these great offenders Hutchinson and Peter Oliver, in Terrorem." The possibly deluded sincerity of the two men amounted to no defense, Adams argued, and he gave examples of other legally punishable acts done in good faith. Among these were Ravallac and Felton, two mentally disturbed assassins of the previous century. One had murdered a French king, the other the Duke of Buckingham. "The Liberty of private Conscience," wrote Adams of the assassins, but with a chilling application to Hutchinson and Oliver, "did not exempt them from the most dreadful Punishment that civil Authority can inflict or human Nature endure." Here, shortly before Hutchinson's ouster, Adams attached to Hutchinson, whom by now he regarded as "the vile Serpent," his own and his party's most extreme imagination of treason and its punishment.³⁷

After Hutchinson was driven out of Massachusetts Adams continued to regard him as the evil genius of the "junto" responsible for all of the province troubles (his supposed associates were Governor Bernard

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 2: 55. (This was another unpublished essay.) See also 2: 75 for a different version of their demises. For Mayhew's health and death see Charles W. Akers, *Called Unto Liberty: A Life of Jonathan Mayhew, 1720-1766* (Cambridge, Mass., 1964), 219-220, 105.

³⁶ Bailyn, *Ordeal*, 2. "Answer of the House of Representatives" (26 Jan. 1773), in Alden Bradford, *Speeches of the Governors of Massachusetts, 1765-1775* (Boston, 1818), 357, 363. On the meaning of "abridgement" see Bailyn, *Ordeal*, 250-251; and Hutchinson, *The History of Massachusetts-Bay*, 3: 293-294n. See also Malcolm Freiberg, "Missing: One Hutchinson Autograph Letter," *Manuscripts* 8(1956), 179-184.

³⁷ *Diary and Autobiography of John Adams*, 2: 192-193. "Vile Serpent": 2: 81.

and Peter Oliver). Writing as "Novanglus" in 1775 Adams charged that "this desperate triumverate" had conspired in the revenue Acts in order to divide part of the proceeds among themselves. Since Hutchinson was in England, "if it was out of his power to do us any more injuries," Adams concluded,

I should wish to forget the past; but, as there is reason to fear he is still to continue his malevolent labors against this country, although he is out of our sight, he should not be out of our minds. This country has everything to fear . . . from the deep intrigues of that artful man.

The emotionalism of "Novanglus," in which Adams mistakenly thought that his pseudonymous antagonist, "Massachusettensis," was Jonathan Sewall, recalled Adams' replies to earlier Sewall essays. (Adams persisted in his wrong identification of "Massachusettensis" well after he had evidence that the author was someone else.) As for Hutchinson, "Novanglus" went from denunciation to a perverse empathy with him. Commenting on Hutchinson's proposal to abridge English liberties he wrote: "My indignation at this letter has sometimes been softened by compassion." Adams explained.

It carries on the face of it evident marks of *madness*. It was written in such a transport of passions, *ambition* and *revenge* chiefly, that his reason was manifestly overpowered . . . Indeed, he seems to have had a confused consciousness of this himself. "Pardon me this excursion," says he; "it really proceeds from the state of mind into which our perplexed affairs often throw me."³⁸

The Adams who felt his own infirm constitution to be threatened by politics, who had suffered a breakdown in 1771 and a *crise de conscience* in 1766 (during which he characterized Jonathan Sewall as mad), was closer in personality to Hutchinson than he realized. For his nemesis was also a man of conscience—one who had suffered his own nervous breakdown in 1767 and subsequent fears for his health similar to those of Adams. It was not surprising, therefore, that after Independence Adams began to show a remorse toward Hutchinson that recalled Otis's

³⁸ John Adams as "Novanglus": *Papers of John Adams*, 2: 277; and *Works of John Adams*, 4: 71. *Papers of John Adams*, 2: 221-222n. *Works of John Adams*, 4: 120. For two discussions of Adams' inexplicable failure either to accept or recall the fact that Daniel Leonard and not Sewall was the author of "Massachusettensis," see Mellen Chamberlin, *PMHS* 6(1890-1891), 253-254, and 399-400.

drunken apology of 1771. Adams thereby completed the pattern of revolutionary experience that first made itself evident in his period of withdrawal.

All in all he followed the pattern of the successful revolutionary, whose remorse, it has been observed, often takes the form of incorporating in the new regime something of what the former paternal authority stood for. The notorious examples are the periods of reaction in the French and Russian revolutions during which there were introduced the worst horrors of the old regime (at least as they had been depicted by the revolutionaries). American remorse, it appears, was of a gentler, subtler sort.

In the minds of the Massachusetts revolutionaries, Hutchinson even more than the king or Parliament stood for the old regime. Nothing points more certainly to him than the ways in which the patriots, and especially Adams, unconsciously reinstated his principles after the Revolution. Before this process began Adams revealed the special importance that it would involve in his case. During the first year of the new government, while sitting in the Continental Congress he learned that he had been appointed to Hutchinson's old office of Chief Justice of Massachusetts. Adams did not reveal his feelings on the occasion, but his accepting the appointment suggests much. In the 1760s, taking Otis's lead, he had objected to Hutchinson's plural office holding. Now, remarkably, in accepting the Chief Justiceship he laid himself open to the very same charge.

Furthermore, Adams held offices at this time that closely paralleled Hutchinson's at the beginning of Otis's campaign. In 1760 Hutchinson had been a Justice of the Peace, Chief Justice, a member of the Massachusetts Council, a judge in Suffolk County, and Lieutenant Governor. In 1776 John Adams was a Justice of the Peace, Chief Justice, a member of the Massachusetts Council, a judge in Suffolk County, and though not Lieutenant Governor, a member of the Continental Congress and Chairman of its Board of War. In response to criticism in Congress Adams, though he was not the only patriot accused of Hutchinsonian plural office holding, resigned his seat on the Massachusetts Council. But, insisting that he had not accepted the Chief Justiceship from "any motives of Ambition"—Hutchinson's disease—he remained in that office.³⁹ As it developed, he never had time to serve, and he did resign

³⁹ Adams was also a Justice of the Quorum and a Colony-wide justice. Ellen E. Brennan, *Plural Office Holding in Massachusetts, 1760-1780: Its Relation to the "Separation" of Departments of Government* (Chapel Hill, 1945), 114-115. *Diary*

in 1777. The Chief Justiceship, it can be said, brought him only grief. Given the obvious difficulties it posed, Adams' acceptance of the office has all the marks of unpolitical and unconscious motivation.

In 1779 when Adams returned from a short diplomatic stay in Europe, he was appointed to the Massachusetts Constitutional Convention, where he soon became the drafter of the new Constitution. Once again, he acted unpolitically and did so in a particularly suggestive way. A previous convention had foundered partly on the issue of whether or not to give the governor a significant power of veto over legislation. Surprisingly, Adams' draft, which for the most part sought moderation, failed to offer a compromise on this point. The question was hardly technical, for as one historian has put it, the governor remained "a symbol of the old kind of government."⁴⁰ Thus in returning the veto power to him Adams flew in the face of the strongest prejudices of his party—prejudices which he had shared when attacking Hutchinson as royal governor.

But Adams' act of restitution went further than a symbolic reinstatement of the powers of the old governorship. Bernard Bailyn has written of Hutchinson that,

in his understanding of government he was of course conservative, but no more so than John Adams, who despised him and feared him and attacked him publicly and privately on every possible occasion but whose constitution for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, which went into effect the month that Hutchinson died, exhibited to perfection the ideal of balance achieved through the independence and separation of powers which, in an older context, Hutchinson had struggled to retain.⁴¹

As time went on Adams grew still closer to Hutchinson; their theories of government had roots in a shared pessimism about human nature.⁴² And it was precisely with respect to this pessimism that Adams exceeded other revolutionaries in his return to elements of the old system. Beginning with the Massachusetts Constitution it grew clear that

and Autobiography of John Adams, 3: 361n., 362. Ironically, Adams' resignation came in a letter to James Otis, Sr., 29 Apr. 1776, *Works of John Adams*, 9: 374.

⁴⁰ Stephen Patterson, *Political Parties in Revolutionary Massachusetts* (Madison, Wis., 1973), see 227; and Jackson T. Main, *The Upper House in Revolutionary America, 1763-1788* (Madison, Wis., 1967), 163.

⁴¹ Bailyn, *Ordeal*, 377.

⁴² Merle Curti, *Human Nature in American Historical Thought* (Columbia, Mo., 1968), 17-22.

Adams' Hutchinsonian philosophy implied basic disagreement with the growing democratic ethos of the American movement. Yet Adams risked and suffered unpopularity for the rest of his life by stubbornly insisting upon that philosophy.

He probably suffered worst for it in 1789 soon after the federal Constitution went into effect. At that time he was elected Vice-President with the prospect of going on to the Presidency just as Hutchinson had gone from lieutenant governor to governor. Almost immediately Adams became involved in the oddest controversy of his career. In the face of a rising tide of republicanism he advocated exalted titles and dress for the officers of the new government. His proposals, though he did not say so, recalled the panoply introduced into the Superior Court by Hutchinson when he became Chief Justice. Adams had ridiculed such splendor at the time and would do so again. But in 1789 he offered philosophical justifications for it. Citizens were not capable of living by abstraction alone, Adams argued; they required the display of symbols of authority. This was to endorse Hutchinson's purpose, as Adams had interpreted it, of using panoply to overawe the opposition to constitutional authority. The costumes in question in both cases, it should be noted, were symbolic of paternal authority.⁴³

As President of the United States John Adams paid back Thomas Hutchinson one last time: in the coin of emulation. Like Governor Hutchinson, President Adams underwent an ordeal of personal attack both from without and within the government. Given his irascible temperament, it appears nothing short of miraculous that he responded as mildly and without rancor as he did. But despite having advocated strong executive power and privilege all his life, Adams proved a weak President. His forbearance and forgiveness of enemies, in fact, recalled the equally extraordinary response of Thomas Hutchinson to his similar ordeal. (In the same way, President Adams' reputation of being susceptible to flattery recalled his own accusations against Hutchinson twenty-five years earlier.)⁴⁴

Hutchinson in one instance—his call for an abridgement of English liberties—had not been entirely mild in response to the intense pressure brought against him, and he had lived to regret it, suffering a “nervous

⁴³ See Shaw, *Character of John Adams*, 227-229.

⁴⁴ But see Ralph Adams Brown's review of *Character of John Adams, Pennsylvania History* 45(1978): 181-183, for a defense against the charge that Adams was a weak president. John Adams advocated strong executive authority in the Massachusetts Constitution and in his theoretical writings of the 1780s and 1790s. *Works of John Adams*, 4: 68, and see Shaw, *Character of John Adams*, 84n.

disorder” after his position was revealed in 1773.⁴⁵ It was surprising, therefore, that when Adams’ Congress passed a similar abridgement of English-American liberties in 1798—the Alien and Sedition Acts—Adams signed them into law. His administration, like Hutchinson’s, had good reasons for the Acts: a state of undeclared war with France, along with virulent, unmerited attacks in the press on the chief executive, and a similar atmosphere of disorder in the streets. Nevertheless, historians are agreed that Adams should have opposed the Congress. It is tempting to speculate that the example of Hutchinson influenced his failure to do so. Adams’ political fate—loss of office—matched Hutchinson’s, in any case. Furthermore, Adams underwent a near nervous breakdown for his stand in 1798, again recalling Hutchinson’s fate.

In his Hutchinsonian forgiveness of enemies, Adams contrasted sharply with Samuel Adams, who called for draconian measures against all opponents of the new American governments. Thus, where Samuel Adams advocated the death penalty for participants in the unsuccessful Shays’s rebellion, Adams, over the objection of his party, pardoned the leader of the later Fries’s rebellion from his death sentence.⁴⁶ The two old revolutionaries exhibited two kinds of relationship to the old regime. Samuel Adams unconsciously imitated what he had attacked it for; John Adams, closer to the typical American pattern, restored some of its old legitimacy.

As an old man Adams continued his Presidential habit of forgiving enemies. He included even Alexander Hamilton, whose machinations actually were as dark as the sometimes wild speculations Adams had about others. Almost alone, though, Hutchinson continued to trouble him. “Many are the years,” Adams confessed in 1816 over thirty years after Hutchinson’s death, “in which I have seriously endeavored to strip from my mind every prejudice, and from my heart every feeling, unfavorable to Mr. Hutchinson.”⁴⁷ This he could not do. For Adams’s demonizing of Hutchinson was integral to his understanding of his own actions in the 1760s and 1770s, and indeed to his understanding of the Revolution itself.

Adams ended his late speculations about Hutchinson on a perplexing note. “We need not fear that Mr. Hutchinson’s Character will be in-

⁴⁵ Bailyn, *Ordeal*, 139.

⁴⁶ William V. Wells, *The Life and Public Services of Samuel Adams*, . . . , 2 vols. (Boston, 1865), 1: 246.

⁴⁷ John Adams to William Tudor, 16 Nov. 1816, *Works of John Adams*, 10: 230; and see Shaw, *Character of John Adams*, 309, 305n.

jured with Posterity” he wrote of the most proscribed figure of the Revolution.

His every virtue, and his every Talent and his every Service will be recorded in polite Language, and blazoned in Splendid colours; when we, poor Beings who resisted him shall be thrown in Shades of darkness in the back ground.¹⁸

Despite Hutchinson’s defeat, it would appear, Adams forever regarded the exiled, unfortunate former governor as a figure surrounded with the aura of authority and success. This oddly self-pitying view amounted both to a final assertion that Hutchinson had been responsible for what the revolutionaries did, and a final restitution of his vice-regal authority.

⁴⁸ John Adams to William Tudor, 25 Nov. 1816, Adams Papers, Reel 123.