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Spring 2000

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Recommended Citation

Rathbun, Lyon. "The Ciceronian Rhetoric of John Quincy Adams." *Rhetorica: A Journal of the History of Rhetoric*, vol. 18, no. 2, [University of California Press, International Society for the History of Rhetoric], 2000, pp. 175–215, <https://doi.org/10.1525/rh.2000.18.2.175>.

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The Ciceronian Rhetoric of John Quincy Adams

Abstract: This article examines the way in which the classical rhetorical tradition inspired John Quincy Adams's public life. While rhetorical scholars have probed Adams's role as Harvard's first Boylston Professor of Rhetoric, they have not appreciated how the classical tradition in general, and Ciceronian rhetoric in particular, influenced his political career. Social scientists, on the other hand, have studied Adams's impact on Antebellum America but have not appreciated how his life-long devotion to classical rhetoric shaped his response to public issues. John Quincy Adams remained inspired by classical rhetorical ideals long after the neo-classicalism and deferential politics of the founding generation had been eclipsed by the commercial ethos and mass democracy of the Jacksonian Era. Many of the idiosyncratic positions that Adams adopted over the course of his long career are explicated by considering his abiding devotion to the Ciceronian ideal of the citizen-orator "speaking well" to promote the welfare of the polis.

O

n Friday, July 11, 1806, John Quincy Adams delivered his inaugural lecture as Harvard's first Bolyston Professor of Rhetoric to an audience crowding the Harvard Hall chapel. Shifting into high, Asiatic gear in his peroration, Adams ardently exclaimed, "Sons of Harvard! You, who are ascending with painful step and persevering toil the eminence of science, to prepare yourselves for the various functions and employments of the world before you, it cannot be necessary to urge upon YOU the importance of the art, concerning which I am speaking". Urging his listeners to embrace the classical rhetorical precepts that he would unpack in his

subsequent thirty five lectures, he proceeded to ask a question that his own career would so eloquently answer:

Is there among you a youth, whose bosom burns with the fires of honorable ambition; who aspires to immortalize his name by the extent and importance of his services to his country; whose visions of futurity glow with the hope of presiding in her councils, of directing her affairs, of appearing to future ages on the rolls of fame, as her ornament and pride? Let him catch from the relics of ancient oratory those unresisted powers, which mold the mind of man to the will of the speaker, and yield the guidance of a nation to the dominion of the voice.¹

The perorations of Adams' *Lectures on Rhetoric and Oratory* are often rendered in a high Ciceronian style—sonorous tone, striking turns of phrase, accumulation of balanced clauses—all calculated to hold the attention of listeners. And, throughout the lectures, in a range of oratorical styles, Adams repeatedly implores his students to embrace the Ciceronian ideal of the citizen-orator dedicated to serving the welfare of the republic.

In calling on his students to become citizen-orators, and in grounding his entire course of lectures on the precepts of classical rhetoric, Adams was markedly out of tune with the emerging orientation of rhetorical studies in America. As early as the 1740s the Belle Lettres Movement had made the appreciation of literature's aesthetic qualities equal in importance to the study and practice of persuasion. By the time Adams had assumed his professorship, Hugh Blair's *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* was setting the standard for rhetorical education and practice.² Many of Adams's peers had internalized Blair's conclusion that "not much is to be expected" from studying the classical rhetoricians.³

The contemporaneous reviews of *Lectures on Rhetoric and Oratory* reflect how pervasive new standards of rhetoric had

¹ John Quincy Adams, *Lectures on Rhetoric and Oratory* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1962) vol. i, p. 29. Subsequent references will be given in the text.

² Michael Halloran, "Rhetoric in the American College Curriculum: The Decline of Public Discourse", *Pre/Text* 3 (1982) pp. 245-69 (p. 258).

³ H. Blair, "From *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*", in P. Bizzell and B. Herzberg eds, *The Rhetorical Tradition: Readings from Classical Times to the Present* (Boston: Bedford Books, 1990) p. 818.

become by the opening decade of the nineteenth century. The major American review, written by Mr Samuel Cooper Thacher, a protégé of the influential Unitarian minister, William Ellery Channing, stated that Adams was "a great offender against the precepts of perspicuity, purity, and propriety". He had "broken down that marked distinction between the appropriate language of poetry and prose". In Thacher's view, these flaws stemmed from his "ambition of perpetual brilliancy. He seems continually straining himself to make his imagination produce by effort, what it does not yield by its spontaneous fertility."⁴ Another review, printed in the *Port Folio*, a Philadelphia literary journal, made a string of similar complaints, followed by the telling insight that Adams's work was "like the reputation of Cicero, 'obfuscated' (sic) by its own splendor".⁵ Judging the *Lectures* by new Blairian standards—perspicuity, purity, and propriety—many of Adams's contemporaries were no longer attuned to Adams's fervent Ciceronian plea to serve the republic with the weapons of ancient rhetoric.

For his part, thoroughly familiar with the modern rhetorical theorists, Adams simply could not imagine making his lectures anything other than a resurrection of classical doctrine. "My plan", Adams confessed in his fourth lecture, "has necessarily been different from that of all the modern writers upon rhetoric and belles-lettres" (i, p. 141). In his first lecture, Adams had declared that Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian had written the definitive works on rhetoric. "To obtain a perfect familiarity with their instructions", Adams declared, "is to arrive at the mastery of the art" (i, p. 29).

John Quincy Adams could not imagine lecturing on anything but the ancients because his consciousness had been molded by the Ciceronian ideal that had inspired his father, John Adams, and so many others of the founding generation. To an extent that has never been sufficiently recognized, John Quincy Adams's identity was determined by the precepts of classical rhetoric that, for Americans of the revolutionary generation, had taken a definitive

⁴ Quoted in J. Jeffery Auer and Jerald L. Banninga, "The Genesis of John Quincy Adams' *Lectures on Rhetoric and Oratory*", *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 49 (1963) pp. 119-32 (p. 129).

⁵ Auer and Banninga, "The Genesis of John Quincy Adams' *Lectures*", p. 130.

shape in the life and writings of Marcus Tullius Cicero. As Adams's most comprehensive statement concerning classical rhetoric, *Lectures on Rhetoric and Oratory* is one of the most revealing, and neglected, sources for understanding the values that shaped his character, worldview, and career.⁶

Learning the Principles of Republican Praxis

The rhetorical ideal that Adams eulogized and taught in *Lectures* had been ingrained into his being by his upbringing and education. He came to consciousness within the whirl of Revolutionary exigencies that gave birth to the American republic; he was groomed to continue the revolutionary effort that his father had done so much to initiate.

⁶ Students of John Quincy Adams have tended to compartmentalize his *Lectures on Rhetoric and Oratory*. Rhetorical scholars have explored the sources of Adams's rhetorical principles or have examined how these principles are reflected in specific orations that Adams delivered. They have avoided making broader claims about how Adams's rhetorical principles are connected to his political outlook or career. See, for example, Horace Rahskopf, "John Quincy Adams: Speaker and Rhetorician", *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 32 (1946) pp. 435-509, or Auer and Banning, "The Genesis of John Quincy Adams' *Lectures*", pp. 119-32. On the other hand, historians, biographers, and political scientists have been preoccupied with Adams's enormous impact on American foreign policy before his presidency and on his later Congressional career. They have generally treated Adams's professorship as a brief interruption of his political career that had no direct bearing on his primary preoccupations with high matters of state. For example, William Lee Miller's *Arguing About Slavery: The Great Battle in the United States Congress* (New York: Knopf, 1996) gives a cogent biographical overview of John Quincy Adams but never mentions his tenure at Harvard. Other works, such as Richard Hofstadter, *The Idea of a Party System: The Rise of Legitimate Opposition in the United States, 1780-1840* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970), Daniel Walker Howe, *The Political Culture of the American Whigs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979) or William Weeks, *John Quincy Adams and American Global Empire* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1992), briefly mention Adams's debt to the classical tradition, or to Cicero, but then proceed to locate his role in immediate nineteenth-century issues. Howe has an excellent chapter on John Quincy, with one paragraph on his classical orientation that notes, "His conception of politics was essentially that of Ciceronian civic humanism" (p. 46). Howe then proceeds to discuss Adams's relation to Whig political culture without further mention, or explanation, of his Ciceronian humanism.

The escalating twenty-year conflict with Britain that culminated in the American Revolution had been punctuated and defined through exhilarating moments of oratory. That exalted enemy of despotism, Cicero, had set the standard for revolutionary oratory.⁷ Most of the revolutionary leaders had read his speeches as well as Rollin's *Roman History*, one of the most widely read books of the Revolutionary Era.⁸ When Dr. Joseph Warren gave an oration commemorating the Boston Massacre in March of 1775, he appeared before his audience wearing what one newspaper described as a "Ciceronian Toga".⁹ As an apprentice lawyer, John Adams prepared himself for political fame by reading Cicero's orations out loud. In his diary he wrote, "Yesterday and today, I have read loud, Tullius' *Orations against Catiline*. The Sweetness and Grandeur of his sounds, and the harmony of his numbers give pleasure enough to reward the reading if one understood none of his meaning".¹⁰

John and Abigail Adams instilled in their eldest son not only a profound reverence for Cicero but also the general devotion to broad learning that had been central to the American Revolutionary effort.¹¹ Reflecting the solicitude she felt for her son's education, Abigail Adams wrote her husband in 1774, "I have taken a very great fondness to reading Rollin's ancient History since you left me and I have persuaded Johnny to read me a page or two every day, and hope he will from his desire to oblige me entertain a fondness for it".¹² Through devotion to education, generally, and the mastery of language, in particular, John Quincy Adams would become worthy of inheriting the mantle of leadership from his father's generation. "If you do not rise to the head not only of your profession, but of your country", John Adams warned his ten-year-old son before they departed for

⁷ Stephen Botein, "Cicero as Role Model for Early American Lawyers", *The Classical Journal* 73 (1977-8) pp. 313-21.

⁸ William Gribbin, "Rollin's Histories and American Republicanism", *The William and Mary Quarterly* 29 (1972) pp. 611-23.

⁹ Quoted in Botein, "Cicero as Role Model", p. 314.

¹⁰ Quoted in Botein, "Cicero as Role Model", p. 316.

¹¹ G. S. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1972) pp. 6-7.

¹² Quoted in W. L. Miller, *Arguing About Slavery*, p. 154.

France together, "it will be owing to your own laziness, slovenliness, and obstinacy".¹³

John Quincy's education was remarkable for combining intense formal study with direct involvement in the revolutionary effort. When John Adams was dispatched to France in 1777, he brought his eldest son. Except for a brief return to Boston in 1781, John Quincy spent the next seven years in Europe, studying in several academies and under the direct supervision of his father. While John Adams prepared him for entry into Harvard by drilling him in algebra, geometry, and trigonometry, he also encouraged him to read poetry, once telling him that he "would never be alone with a poet in his pocket".¹⁴ John Adams assigned his son Latin sentences to translate as well as Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War* in the original Greek. When their return to Boston from France was delayed for three months in the spring of 1779 owing to the lack of ships, they traveled from harbor to harbor studying together and translating Cicero's orations.¹⁵

While John Adams encouraged broad learning across the whole spectrum of human knowledge, he followed classical precedent in placing rhetoric at the core of his son's education. When John Quincy resisted his fathers' command to read through Demosthenes' *Philippics*, John Adams wrote, "I absolutely insist upon it, that you begin upon Demosthenes".¹⁶ So central was rhetoric to John Quincy Adams's education that when visiting London in 1784, he was *commanded* to compare the oratorical styles of the presiding leaders in the British parliament. Already showing a distinctly Ciceronian preoccupation with audience, John Quincy dutifully informed his father,

If I may be allowed to give my opinion, Mr. Pitt is upon the whole the best and most pleasing speaker of them all. He has much grace in speaking and has an admirable choice of words. He speaks very fluently, so distinctly that I did not lose a word of what he said, and he was not once embarrassed to express his ideas. Mr. Fox on the

¹³ Quoted in Paul C. Nagel, *John Quincy Adams: A Public Life, a Private Life* (New York: Knopf, 1997) p. 10.

¹⁴ S. F. Bemis, *John Quincy Adams and the Foundations of American Foreign Policy* (New York: Knopf, 1965) p. 160.

¹⁵ Nagel, *John Quincy Adams*, p. 23.

¹⁶ Quoted in Nagel, *John Quincy Adams*, p. 23.

contrary speaks with such an amazing heat and rapidity that he often gets embarrassed and stammers some time before he can express himself. His ideas are all striking, but they flow upon him in such numbers that he cannot communicate them without difficulty... There, Sir, in obedience to your command have I given you my opinion of the eloquence of several great orators.¹⁷

When elected by his graduating class to deliver a valedictory address at Harvard, John Quincy acknowledged his father's guiding role by writing, "Little did I think when you gave me those lessons at Auteuil, which you call our suppers, that they would be productive of this effect".¹⁸

John Quincy's learning during his European years was astonishing. Between his eleventh and eighteenth year he had learned to read Spanish, Italian, Greek, and Latin. He was fully fluent in French and Dutch. He had read the essential works of classical literature and history; he was versed in British and French literature; by the age of ten, he had read through most of Shakespeare; by twelve, he had digested Le Sage's *Gil Blas* in the original French.¹⁹ But the telling quality of his learning was not its breadth, but its application. Under the spell of the *Belle Lettres* and Elocutionary Movements, many of John Quincy's contemporaries viewed learning as a means of cultivating a facility for learned conversation that would enhance social status. While John Quincy relished the stimulation of intellectual talk, and even helped start a literary salon, the Crackbrain Club, while practising law in Boston, he could never view learning as merely ornamental. At the feet of his parents, John Quincy Adams had learned that education was training for the deliberations of public life.

John Adams did not only help his son translate Cicero; he sent him, at the age of fifteen, on a two-year trip to St Petersburg as secretary and translator for Henry Dana, first American minister to the Russian Court. After returning to Paris, John Quincy assisted his father, who negotiated treaties of amity and

¹⁷ "Letter to John Adams" (6 June 1784), Worthington C. Ford ed., *The Writings of John Quincy Adams* (New York: Macmillan, 1913-17) vol. i, p. 14.

¹⁸ Quoted in Bemis, *John Quincy Adams and the Foundations of American Foreign Policy*, p. 19.

¹⁹ Bemis, *John Quincy Adams and the Foundations*, p. 16.

commerce with various European powers between 1783 and 1785. John Quincy did not merely read Voltaire, Rousseau, Hume, and Adam Smith; he participated in the dinners that Lafayette gave every Monday evening for the American diplomatic corps and visited frequently with Franklin and Jefferson. In 1825 John Adams recollected to Jefferson that John Quincy had "appeared to me to be almost as much your boy as mine".²⁰ John Quincy Adams's own education, applying intense learning to direct participation in public affairs, embodied the ideal that he would promote in *Lectures on Rhetoric and Oratory*.

The capstone of Adams's education was the fifteen months that he spent at Harvard between March 1786 and July 1787. Throughout the revolutionary period, Harvard had incubated revolutionary zeal in many of its students. The Ramist preoccupation with style and delivery that had dominated rhetorical education during the earlier colonial era became more classically oriented during the eighteenth century. The works of Cicero and Quintilian began circulating widely. Classroom exercises shifted from Latin to English; in 1759, John Ward's *A System of Oratory*, grounded in Quintilian and Cicero, became the standard rhetorical text. By the revolutionary period, student debating societies were disputing charged political issues, and Harvard commencements bore titles such as "Is a Government Despotic in which the People have no check on the Legislative Power?"²¹

Adams enrolled at Harvard to dissolve any vestiges of foppishness he had acquired in Europe and to prepare himself for citizenship in the new republic. In 1786 he wrote his mother,

I feared that by having received so large a share of my education in Europe my attachment to a republican government would not be sufficient for pleasing my countrymen; but I find on the contrary that I am the best republican here, and with my classmates, if I ever

²⁰ Quoted in Bemis, *John Quincy Adams and the Foundations*, p. 16.

²¹ Michael Halloran, "Rhetoric in the American College Curriculum", cit. in n. 3 above, p. 260.

have any disputes on the subject, I am always obliged to defend that side of the question.²²

Admitted to advanced junior standing in March of 1786, Adams's senior year was largely devoted to crafting speeches and preparing forensic disputations. Moreover, he spent much of his leisure time on orations and debates for the "A.B." Literary Club and the Phi Beta Kappa Society. In all, he wrote and delivered seventeen orations and forensic disputations which culminated in his commencement address, a rite-of-passage into the public life of the community that was assessed not merely by faculty and students, but by a broad audience of community members that included the governor and other dignified citizens.²³

Teaching the Principles of Republican Praxis

From the day that Adams delivered his commencement address until he returned to Harvard eighteen years later as the first Boylston Professor of Rhetoric, he sought ways of applying his learning to public service. Employing the oratorical skills that he would teach in *Lectures on Rhetoric and Oratory*, Adams began championing the great ideals that would animate him throughout his life, preserving the receding revolutionary heritage of the republic while securing its exalted future.

A series of editorials published under the suitably Latinate pseudonyms of "Publicola" and "Marcellus" brought Adams to the attention of George Washington, who nominated him in 1794 to be Minister Resident to the Netherlands. When his father assumed the presidency in 1796 he was reassigned to Prussia, where he served as Minister Plenipotentiary until 1801. Abruptly recalled to the United States after his father's defeat by Jefferson in the election of 1800, Adams overcame his disdain for the divisiveness of party politics and won a seat in the Massachusetts

²² "John Quincy Adams to Abigail Adams" (30 December 1786), *The Writings of John Quincy Adams*, vol. ii, p. 230.

²³ R. A. East, *John Quincy Adams, The Critical Years: 1785-1794* (New York: Bookman Associates, 1962) pp. 50-54.

State Senate in 1802. In November of that year he was nominated by the Federalist Party Caucus to be Senator from Massachusetts.

Although his *Publius* essays denouncing the French Revolution had made him a darling of the Federalists, Adams had entered politics determined to rise above factional interests. "A politician in this country must be the man of a party", he had written in his diary on 28 January 1802: "I would fain be the man of my whole country."²⁴ Earning a reputation as "unmanageable", Adams became a pariah to the whole Federalist Party when he endorsed the Louisiana Purchase and Jefferson's Embargo Act. Adams saw himself as having acted for the common good rather than narrow factional interest. To a fellow member of the committee that considered the Embargo recommendation, he had written, "this measure will cost you and me our seats, but private interest must not be put in opposition to the public good".²⁵ Having lost his base of support in the Federalist Party and assuming that his legislative career would end at the next election, Adams accepted the invitation to become Harvard's first Boylston Professor of Rhetoric in the spring of 1805, while still serving out his senatorial term.

In May 1808 the Massachusetts Legislature voted to elect James Lloyd Jr as Adams's successor to the senate six months before the normal time for such a choice. Secure in his professorship, Adams had every reason to believe his political career was over. He had purchased a home in Boston where his third son, Charles Francis Adams, was born and had begun composing a second series of lectures with the emphasis placed on *oratory* rather than on *rhetoric*. His professorship was an ideal way of fulfilling what he often professed to be his deepest ambition, to be a man of letters. In retrospect he would consider the published version of his Boylston Lectures to be his greatest literary achievement. In his diary he told himself: "I should never, unless by some special favor of Heaven, accomplish any work of higher elevation or more extensive compass."²⁶

²⁴ Quoted in Bemis, *John Quincy Adams and the Foundations*, p. 112.

²⁵ Quoted in Bemis, *John Quincy Adams and the Foundations*, p. 147.

²⁶ *Memoirs of John Quincy Adams*, ed. Charles Francis Adams (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1874-77) vol. ii, p. 148.

Yet the very ideal that Adams espoused in his *Lectures on Rhetoric and Oratory* required that he give up his professorship at the very first opportunity and re-enter the fray of public life. The essential principle of his *Lectures* and of his identity was that personal fulfillment and professional accomplishment could only be found through praxis, through active involvement in public affairs. Adams could never feel complete as a mere college professor. When James Madison nominated him to be First Minister Plenipotentiary to Russia shortly after his election in 1808, Adams resigned his professorship and sailed for St. Petersburg on 5 August 1809. "To live in the memory of mankind by College Lectures is not the aim of a very soaring ambition", he wrote to his brother in 1809, explaining his return to public life.²⁷

Because Adams only taught at Harvard for three years, scholars have tended to dismiss his Boylston Professorship as a negligible hiatus in his career as diplomat, President, and congressman. Furthermore, at first glance, *Lectures on Rhetoric and Oratory* hardly appears to be a seminal statement of John Quincy Adams's core beliefs. The text, after all, is a college primer, reiterating classical rhetorical dictates that college students had been practising since the recovery of Cicero's *De oratore* in 1422. Yet in no other work does Adams express so clearly his view that knowledge is essentially semantic and rhetorical; nowhere else does he reveal so fully how his rhetorical epistemology shaped his understanding of the human condition; in no other text did Adams express how his rhetorically grounded world view infused his conception of a republican polity. Overlooked by so many contemporary students of John Quincy Adams, the *Lectures* help explain some of the most enigmatic aspects of Adams's life: why, over the course of his long career, he reversed his positions on so many political issues and why "Old Man Eloquent" could not let even advanced age or debilitating illness drive him from public life.

Adams's own Harvard students must have been struck by their professor's rejection of the new rhetorical theories defining the discipline at the opening of the nineteenth century. Over the course of his thirty-six lectures, Adams repeated at least six times that his endowed professorship required him to teach classical,

²⁷ Quoted in Auer and Banninga, "The Genesis", cit. in n. 4 above, p. 127.

not modern, rhetorical theory.²⁸ With equal frequency he explained why classical theory was preferable to the new rhetorics of Campbell, Sheridan, and Blair.

While Blair had dismissed the classical tradition as superannuated by enlightenment science, Adams devoted his first seven lectures to a historical overview of the discipline without discussing any rhetorical theories developed after Quintilian. In general terms, the new rhetorics relied upon experimental science to discover knowledge, and upon rhetoric to communicate it. Their emphasis was on universal modes of discourse that addressed fixed mental capacities such as reason, memory, and imagination. Hugh Blair, the most popular of the new rhetoricians, grounded his theory in Lockean psychology, and defined rhetoric as a means of refining the taste of speakers and listeners.²⁹ In contrast, Adams returned to the classical preoccupation with persuading actual audiences. Adams, like Cicero, sought to integrate the content of discourse with its form, and therefore saw invention, disposition, and style as elements of one fluid process. For Adams, the end of rhetoric was to prepare citizens for public deliberations by learning how to persuade living audiences. "The exercises to which you are here accustomed", Adams explained,

are not intended merely for the display of the talents you have acquired. They are instruments put into your hands for future use. It is to give you a clue for the labyrinth of legislation in the public councils; a spear for the conflict of judicial war in the public tribunals; a sword for the field of religious and moral victory in the pulpit. (*Lectures*, i, p. 62)

Adams embraced classical rhetorical precepts precisely because they had been formulated to equip citizens for the public canvassing that had originated in the first republics. In contrast modern rhetorics were the products of monarchies, like France, or corrupted democracies, like the British Commonwealth. Classical rhetoric, Adams emphasized, was produced in the ancient city states where decisions were forged in the crucible of public

²⁸ Adams, *Lectures*, vol. i, pp. 171, 178, 229, 397 and vol. ii, pp. 139, 142.

²⁹ Bruce Herzberg, "Hugh Blair", in T. Enos ed., *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric and Composition* (New York: Garland, 1996) p. 79.

debate. In the open forums of Athens and Rome, Adams explained, "eloquence produced a powerful effect, not only upon the minds of the hearers, but upon the issue of the deliberation". In contrast, the European nations that lacked democratic institutions had produced eviscerated rhetorical traditions. "Those nations", Adams wrote, "which for ages have gloried in the devotion to literature, science, and the arts, have never been able to exhibit a specimen of deliberative oratory that can bear a comparison with those transmitted down to us from antiquity" (i, p. 23).

Adams's logic was clear. Having resurrected the deliberative processes of the ancient city states, the new American republic had to center its educational practice in the ancient rhetorical tradition. "Youthful Americans", he declared in his second lecture,

cannot fail to remark, that their own nation is at this time precisely under the same circumstances, which were so propitious to the advancement of rhetoric and oratory among the Greeks. Like them, we are divided into a number of separate commonwealths, all founded upon the principles of the most enlarged social and civil liberty...Here then eloquence is recommended by the most elevated usefulness, and encouraged by the promise of the most precious rewards. (i, p. 70)

Inspired by the republican polities in which they lived, the classical masters had articulated timeless truths that modern theorists simply could not supplant. As Adams explained in his penultimate lecture on memory, recent rhetorical theorists had rejected classical conceptions of memory and delivery because "they were always anxious to add something of their own to the discoveries of real genius" (i, p. 351). In Adams's view, real genius was the literary, or oratorical, articulation of universal truths within the flux of immanent social life. The *classic* works on rhetoric, and all other forms of *classic* literature, were essential repositories of cultural wisdom because for Adams, no less than for Isocrates or Cicero, human knowledge was inescapably linguistic and social.

Echoing the famous eulogy to language that Cicero makes in the opening book of *De oratore* and that Isocrates makes in *Antidosis*, Adams explained,

It is by the means of reason, clothed with speech that the most precious blessings of social life are communicated from man to man...wherever man has been found in a social state, and wherever he has been sensible of his dependence upon a supreme disposer of events, the value and the power of public speaking, if not universally acknowledged, has at least been universally felt. (i, pp. 14-15)

Adams flagged his manifestly rhetorical conception of knowledge when he compared Plato unfavorably to Isocrates in his third lecture on the history of rhetoric. Singling out Plato's great rival for special praise, Adams wrote, "Isocrates was not only an able rhetorician, but an excellent citizen, and a true patriot". Adams praised Isocrates' oratory for combining patriotic content with exquisitely turned form. Emphasizing Isocrates' devotion to Athens, Adams explained: "His style is remarkable for its elegance, its polished periods, and harmonious numbers. Like his master, Gorgias, he delights in antithesis and pointed expression, but he is more copious and diffuse." (i, p. 85)

In contrast, Adams declared Plato was "a genius more sublime [than Socrates] *though far less correct*" (Italics added). He was "addicted to the pomp and magnificence of speech as much as the most ostentatious of the sophists". "His writings", Adams concluded, dismissing the entire edifice of Platonic philosophy, "are not only poetical to the extremist boundaries of poetry; they often encroach upon the borders of mysticism, and approach the undistinguishable regions of intellectual chaos" (i, p. 87). For Adams, as for Isocrates, wisdom was to be found and expressed in language, as expressed in the great works of Western literature and oratory. To banish poets from society, as Plato would have done, was to deny citizens the only true source of wisdom.

Defining rhetoric in his first lecture, Adams followed Aristotle's distinction between the certain realm of logical demonstration, typified by mathematics, and the contingent domain of rhetoric, encompassed by the whole realm of human language. "Logic", Adams explained broadly, "corresponds to the

operations of the mind within itself; rhetoric to the communication of their results to the minds of others" (i, p. 40). Rhetoric was coextensive with human language because human concerns could not be extricated from the words that expressed them.

In lecture thirty, Adams announced that where discourse about the concrete world could be communicated with tangible referents, this was not the case with abstractions. "Of ideas of reflection", he wrote, "no such prototype can exist. The operations of the mind therefore, when exhibited by means of speech, must be embodied into figures and hence, every word representing such an operation must have been originally figurative". "Nothing", he concluded, "is more common than figurative language" (i, p. 251). Whatever absolute truths were contained in words, they remain human constructs; for good or ill, language was the essential medium of social existence.

Adams saw no contradiction between the rhetorical epistemology that he clearly elaborated in *Lectures*, and the absolute truth of divine revelation, or the positive knowledge about the world obtained through scientific investigation. As students of John Quincy Adams have emphasized, he was devoutly religious and intensely interested in science, especially mathematics and astronomy. Adams's life-long interest in measurements of money, distance, and weight culminated in the *Report on Weights and Measures* that he wrote while serving as Secretary of State and submitted to the Senate in February of 1821. Like others inspired by the Enlightenment, Adams was captivated by the possibilities of scientific discovery. Yet, tellingly, his most profound contribution to the advancement of scientific knowledge was battling, as President and congressman, for the establishment of an astronomical observatory in the District of Columbia. Lampooned for his defense of "lighthouses in the sky" Adams's tireless efforts were instrumental in the establishment of the Smithsonian Institution in 1846.³⁰ Adams yearned not to create scientific knowledge, but to promote it with his own oratory.

Believing in the possibility of absolute knowledge about the physical world, Adams also assumed the transcendent reality of God. Indeed, Adams considered religious worship so central that

³⁰ Bemis, *John Quincy Adams and the Union* (New York: Knopf, 1956) pp. 501-23.

in *Lectures* he elevated homiletics into a fourth branch of rhetoric alongside deliberative, forensic, and demonstrative oratory. This innovation was his singular departure from classical precedent.

In his lecture on devotional oratory, Adams identified Christianity as the most significant historical development since Antiquity because of its tendency "to soften the tempers and purify the morals of mankind" (i, p. 375). The benefits of Christianity, however, were not the result of divine intervention, but of human inspiration. For Adams, man could only know God's will in the mirror of words shaped rhetorically into sermons and other forms of devotional literature. Clarifying the relationship between man and God in his seventh lecture, Adams emphasized the unbridgeable gap separating man from God. "Where God creates", Adams wrote, "man can only find". For Adams, human beings were limited to "the imitation, as far as the imperfection of human powers will permit, of his general, unvarying laws" (i, p. 176). Because man could only know God figuratively, not directly, Adams dismissed disputes over theological doctrine as essentially semantic and profoundly destructive. "The folly of understanding, in their literal sense, expressions manifestly figurative" had caused the destructive schisms and religious wars that blighted the history of Christianity (i, p. 349).

Throughout his life, Adams dismissed all disputes about religious doctrine as irrelevant to the essential truths of Christianity. "The only advantage attending upon the evils of controversy", he wrote his mother in 1815, "is that it sharpens the weapons of the combatants and improves their skill".³¹ Echoing his estimate of Plato expressed in the *Lectures*, he told his father in 1816 that he had never had "much relish for the speculations of the first philosophy". He did not delight "in reasoning high upon 'fix'd fate, free will and foreknowledge absolute'".³² As he stressed in the *Lectures*, the objective of the preacher was to help worshipers in "their own advancement in virtue" (i, p. 325). Christian virtue, for Adams, was synonymous with civic virtue.

³¹ "John Quincy Adams to Abigail Adams" (London, 6 December 1815), *The Writings of John Quincy Adams* vol. ii, p. 431.

³² "John Quincy Adams to John Adams" (20 June 1816), *The Writings of John Quincy Adams*, vol. iii, p. 111-12.

Both improved human conduct by promoting concern for the common good.³³

As a rhetorician, Adams was devoted to the shifting realm of the impermanent, the probable, and the contingent. As a devotee of enlightenment science, and as an heir of the puritan tradition, Adams believed absolutely in universal natural laws that formed the ultimate basis of the human and physical worlds. For Adams, the role of the orator-statesman was to mediate between the transcendent and immanent realms. In lecture twenty-one he wrote,

It is this very faculty of pointing the general principles of moral and political science to the specific object in debate and of extracting from the subject in discussion new scintillations of light to illuminate the paths of civilized life that constitutes the permanent powers and glory of the public speaker...It is no longer Cicero, the advocate of his friends, or the prosecutor of a thief. It is Cicero, the instructor of ages, the legislator of human kind. (ii, p. 55)

While the rhetor had to bring wisdom to bear on human problems, he could only grasp, and express, that wisdom through words.

Where the end of rhetoric was to champion "truth, freedom, and humanity" within the fluctuating circumstances of social life, its means included the whole arsenal of linguistic weapons that could be used to persuade actual audiences. Throughout his thirty-six lectures—seven providing historical background, nine covering invention, eight taking up disposition, ten discussing style, one treating memory, and one discussing delivery—Adams consistently focused on how to persuade actual audiences.

In his opening lecture on invention, Adams explained that this first art of rhetoric involved the process of "gathering from the whole domain of real or apparent truth their inexhaustible subsidies, to secure the triumph of persuasion" (i, p. 168). Emphasizing the rhetorical imperative of striking an audience with an intended effect, Adams embraced Cicero's prescription for mastering the widest possible breadth of human knowledge.

³³ In conflating Christian and civic virtue, Adams was echoing a dominant motif of American revolutionary thought. See Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787*, cit. in n. 11 above, pp. 114-18.

He explained that "No penurious or scanty stock of knowledge will suffice" to accomplish the diverse objectives of speakers (i, p. 104).

Appealing to diverse audiences with varied purposes, the orator must master the whole spectrum of oratorical styles, from the unadorned attic to the highly turned Asiatic. Again echoing Cicero, he wrote, "there are subjects, peculiarly fitted to each of these three (high, intermediate, and plain) modes of speaking and the perfection of the orator consists in the proper use and variation of them all, according to the occasion" (i, p. 111). To achieve greatness, the citizen-orator had to combine the simple, sublime, and intermediate styles to inform, persuade, or move an audience to action.

Again and again in the *Lectures* Adams used militaristic metaphors to describe the functions of rhetoric. Where logic is the *arsenal* of thought, rhetoric is its *artillery*. Rhetoric "is a *spear* for the conflict of judicial war in the public tribunals; a *sword* for the field of religious and moral victory in the pulpit" (i, p. 62, italics added). Words were the weapons orators used to strike the minds and hearts of their listeners. Thus, the narration of an oration had to follow the rule of probability rather than of truth. "There is a natural connection between truth and probability", he explained, "hence it follows that an improbable truth is less adapted to obtain belief than a probable falsehood" (i, p. 426). In lecture ten he stated categorically, "The domain of rhetorical argument is not certainty, but probability. The propositions are not absolute, but always in some degree problematical." (i, p. 38)

In identifying knowledge as intrinsically verbal, in emphasizing the orator's need to adapt ideas to the understanding of an audience, in calling for mastery of general knowledge, and in recommending usage of the whole range of oratorical styles, Adams was echoing the precepts of his idol, Cicero. Students could master the art of rhetoric, Adams declared, not merely by studying Cicero, but by pursuing the same ideal of excellence that had resulted in Cicero's own mastery of rhetoric. Cicero, Adams revealed, had achieved greatness through his own devotion to the pursuit of ideal excellence. "It appears to have been the study of his whole life", Adams wrote,

to form an idea of a perfect orator, and of exhibiting his image to the world. In this treatise [*De oratore*] he has concentrated the result of all his observation, experience, and reflection. It is the idealized image of a speaker, in the mind of Cicero; what a speaker should be; what no speaker ever will be; but what every speaker should devote the labors of his life to approximate. (i, p. 110)

The key to pursuing the same "ideal excellence" that had inspired Cicero, Adams emphasized, was through praxis. Only through action, "not in resolutions, much less in pretensions", could the ideal be realized. "It must be the steady purpose of a life", Adams declared, "maturely considered, deliberately undertaken, and inflexibly pursued, through all the struggles of human opposition, and all the vicissitudes of fortune" (i, p. 113). The orator-citizen could always be inspired by "ideal excellence" even if he could not realize his aspirations within the constraints of finite society and the unpredictable decrees of fortune. Pursuing an ideal of excellence that could never be fully attained was the only means of achieving greatness as a citizen—the only way of winning the highest encomium that had capped Cicero's own greatness—being "proclaimed by the voice of free Rome, the father of his country" (i, p. 133).

From the moment he stepped onto the public stage giving his commencement speech at Harvard in 1787, until he was stricken with a cerebral haemorrhage at the age of eighty-one in the House of Representatives, John Quincy Adams attempted to live what he preached in *Lectures on Rhetoric and Oratory*. He devoted himself, through writing and speaking, to his own conception of the common good. At each juncture of his life, when he could have retired and pursued his literary ambitions, he chose to re-enter the public arena. Emerson caught the Ciceronian core of his character when he noted in his diary that Adams was not "a literary gentleman but a bruiser", who lived for the exhilaration of political combat.³⁴ Over the course of his long life, he eschewed ideological consistency as much as religious controversy. Dedicated to defending the transcendent ideals of the American Revolution within the fluctuating circumstances of social life,

³⁴ *Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, vol. vi, ed. E. W. Emerson and W. E. Forbes (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1911) pp. 349-50.

Adams lived by Cicero's dictum: "I live from day to day; I say anything that strikes my mind as probable."³⁵ Again and again over the course of his long life, Adams contradicted publicly established positions as he took up new arguments that suited his purposes at the moment. And by the end of his life, despite his many defeats and disappointments, he did achieve his highest ambition, to be revered, like Cicero, as a true father of his country.

The Voice of Rising Glory

John Quincy Adams's reputation as an orator rests primarily on the blistering deliberative speeches that he delivered as a congressman between 1831 and 1848. Adams's congressional oratory included many demonstrative speeches as well as his famous defense of the Amistad crew before the Supreme Court. The myriad speeches he delivered during these eighteen years helped to make congressional debates over the Gag Rule, abolition of slavery, and the annexation of Texas issues of national importance.

While Adams gave relatively fewer speeches during his pre-congressional career, two orations from the early phase of his public life, commemorating the founding of Plymouth in 1802 and observing the Fourth of July in 1821, are especially noteworthy. They exemplify how Adams used Ciceronian techniques to help popularize the national ideology of empire that would saturate American culture after Polk's election in 1844 and rationalize the enormous territorial gains of the 1840s under the banner of Manifest Destiny.

Adams's diplomatic career had begun in 1794, when President Washington nominated him to be Minister Resident to the Netherlands, and it culminated with the Transcontinental Treaty of 1819, still considered by many to be "the greatest victory won by any single individual in the history of the United States".³⁶

³⁵ Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations*, trans J. E. King, Loeb Classical Library 141 (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press) pp. 458-59.

³⁶ Bemis, *John Quincy Adams and the Foundations of American Foreign Policy*, cit. in n. 14 above, p. 340.

Against the backdrop of Adams's singular contribution in making the United States a continental republic, his early speeches reinforce the widely held assumption that Adams was, in essence, a nationalist dedicated to fulfilling what he often claimed was the nation's providential destiny to civilize the North American continent and spread republicanism across the globe.³⁷ However, when he is viewed as a Ciceronian, rather than a nationalist ideologue, the vision of empire that he articulated in his early speeches can be understood as a polemical strategy for uniting a severely fragmented polity. The resonating metaphors of empire that Adams broadcast in his early speeches were topoi that he adopted, discarded, and re-deployed, under the shifting circumstances of a long career. His early arguments for a "Yankee" empire, like his later arguments against a "Jacksonian" empire, were consistently made to defend the civic foundations of the republic that his father's generation had created.

By the time Adams delivered his 1802 oration celebrating the founding of Plymouth Colony, he had already established himself as a forceful speaker and essayist dedicated to fulfilling what many Fourth-of-July orators were envisioning as the nation's providential destiny. In his 1787 Harvard Commencement Address, Adams had developed his peroration with a catalogue of the national triumphs that would materialize when the citizenry had regained "those severe republican virtues...that alone can effectually support the glorious cause of freedom and of virtue." Heaping up clause after balanced clause of pathos charged assurances, Adams moved toward his ending, exclaiming,

The radiant sun of our union would soon emerge from those thick clouds which obscure his glory, shine with the most resplendent luster, and diffuse throughout the astonished world the brilliant

³⁷ This, essentially, is how Bemis views John Quincy Adams in his two volume biography. Bemis's view is reiterated in Walter LaFeber, *John Quincy Adams and American continental Empire* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1965) and William Weeks *John Quincy Adams and American Global Empire*, cit. in n. 6 above. A more subtle understanding of Adams's political views can be found in Greg Russell, *John Quincy Adams and the Public Virtues of Diplomacy* (Columbus: University of Missouri Press, 1995). While Russell sees Adams as rooted in classical ideals generally, he does not link Adams's worldview to Ciceronian Rhetoric.

light of science, and the genial warmth of freedom. Our eagle would soon extend the wing of protection to the wretched object of tyranny and persecution in every quarter of the globe.

In his final tri-partite sentence, Adams wrote, "May national honor and integrity distinguish the American commonwealths till the last trump shall announce the dissolution of the world, and the whole frame of nature shall be consumed in one universal conflagration".³⁸ Here, in this final sentence, Adams effected that essential association of nationalist ideology: merging the secular, time-bound fate of society into biblical time that would culminate in the millennial return and rule of Christ.

Adams had served in Prussia between 1796 and 1801 and was beginning his career in the Massachusetts Legislature when he delivered his *Oration Delivered at Plymouth, at the Anniversary Commemoration of the First Landing of our Ancestors at that Place*. In Europe, he had watched the euphoria of the French Revolution begin transmogrifying into the juggernaut of Napoleonic despotism; he had seen the unity of the Revolutionary leadership in America dissolve into the ferocious party faction of the 1790s. As he was publicly elaborating his exalted vision of futurity, Adams was privately wracked with fears of civic dissolution which he frequently expressed in his correspondence. From St Petersburg, he wrote his mother in 1811,

If that Party (Federalist) is not effectually put down in Massachusetts, as completely as they already are in New York, and Pennsylvania, and all the southern and western states, the union is gone. Instead of a nation, coextensive with the North American continent, destined by God and nature to be the most populous and most powerful people ever combined under one social compact, we shall have an endless multitude of little insignificant clans and tribes at eternal war with one another for a rock, or a fish pond, the sport and fable of European masters and oppressors.³⁹

³⁸ John Quincy Adams, "Upon the Importance and Necessity of Public Faith to the Well-Being of a Community", *The Columbian Magazine* (September 1787) pp. 625-28.

³⁹ "To Abigail Adams" (30 June 1811), *The Writings of John Quincy Adams*, vol. iv, p. 128.

The millennial future that Adams depicted in his early demonstrative orations resonated forcefully in the Calvinist conscience of his New England listeners. He was mustering the central image of Puritan theology to keep the deeply fragmented republic from breaking into pieces.

In *Oration Delivered at Plymouth*, Adams catalogued the Puritan accomplishments that he claimed had laid the foundations of the nation's exalted future. Eulogizing Puritan accomplishments, he interjected a resounding justification for removing native peoples from the path of civilization. "No European settlement ever formed upon this continent", Adams declared, "has been more distinguished for undeviating kindness and equity towards the savages". In defending his claim, he launched into a ringing defense of the policy of overturning Native American land claims that helped to shape the rationale for tribal removal that would be used throughout the nineteenth century. Building up an accumulation of rhetorical questions that fill nearly two full pages, Adams unequivocally asserted the superiority of the European over the Native American claim to the land. "What is the right of a huntsman to the forest of a thousand miles over which he has accidentally ranged in quest of prey? Shall the liberal bounties of Providence to the race of man be monopolized by one of ten thousand for whom they were created?"⁴⁰

Shifting into his peroration, he reaffirmed his core assertion that adhering to the virtues embodied in the Puritan settlers of Plymouth Colony would secure the future glory of the nation. "Preserve in all their purity, refine if possible from all their alloy, those virtues which we this day commemorate as the ornament of our forefathers", he admonished his listeners, launching into his pathos-filled peroration,

Adhere to them with inflexible resolution, as to the horns of the altar; instill them with unwearied perseverance into the minds of your children; bind your soul and theirs to the national union as the chords of life are centered into the heart, and you shall soar with

⁴⁰ John Quincy Adams, *Oration Delivered at Plymouth, at the Anniversary Commemoration of the First Landing of our Ancestors at that Place* (Boston: Russell and Cutler, 1802) p. 25.

rapid and steady wing to the summit of human glory. Nearly a century ago, one of those rare minds to whom it is given to discern future greatness in its seminal principles, upon contemplating the situation of this continent, pronounced in a vein of poetic inspiration, "Westward the star of empire takes its way." Let us all unite in ardent supplications to the founder of nations and the builder of worlds that what then was prophecy may continue unfolding into history—that the dearest hopes of the human race may not be extinguished in disappointment, and that the last may prove the noblest empire of time.⁴¹

Conflating Christian and civic virtue, Adams sought to arouse hope and resolution in his audience. His ringing peroration was grounded in a Yankee-accented logic of Manifest Destiny: God had favored the United States in the past because the New England Puritans had been virtuous; God would favor the republic in the future if its citizens continued to practice the virtues that characterized the first settlers of Plymouth Colony. As Adams's career progressed, and the nation entered a period of unparalleled growth after the War of 1812, he became increasingly convinced of his country's collective virtue. He redoubled his diplomatic efforts to promote expansion and became increasingly strident in his rhetorical eulogies to American empire.

Address delivered on the occasion of reading The Declaration of Independence, Fourth of July, 1821 was perhaps the most stirring speech of Adams's diplomatic career. Its stinging rebuke of England was denounced in the British press and gave Adams much notoriety in the early skirmishes of the 1824 presidential election. He delivered it at the very peak of a diplomatic career that, at every turn, had been devoted to territorial expansion.

John Quincy Adams had been the only Federalist in the Senate who approved Jefferson's enactment of the Louisiana Purchase. As one of the negotiators at Ghent in 1814, he vigorously protected American fishing rights in Newfoundland and Labrador while resisting any discrimination placed on American goods or maritime rights. As Minister Plenipotentiary to Great Britain between 1815 and 1817, Adams was instrumental in drawing the U. S.-Canadian boundary between the Great lakes

⁴¹ Adams, *Oration Delivered at Plymouth*, p. 31.

and the Rockies along the 49th parallel. Britain had insisted the line be drawn 150 miles further south to give British traders direct access to the Mississippi River. By preventing this, Adams retained for the United States large sections of the present states of Minnesota, North Dakota, Montana, and Washington. As Secretary of State, he sought to enlarge American trading rights in the British West Indies, abolish privateering, and establish the rights of neutral shipping during wartime. Adams's vigorous efforts to expand American control over the continent culminated in the Transcontinental Treaty of 1819 which made the United States a continental republic for the first time. His triumph in negotiating the 1819 Treaty was itself capped by his formulation of the Monroe Doctrine and, finally, by his election to the presidency in 1824.⁴²

When Adams delivered his 1821 oration, he was already being groomed by his parents and supporters for the presidency. His mother noted that people were beginning to mention him as "worthy to preside over the counsels of a Great Nation", while John Adams used his connections to broadcast his son's accomplishments in newspapers.⁴³

Having done so much diplomatically to extend American greatness, John Quincy Adams's speech further reiterated and legitimized the American ideology of empire. As oratory, it worked through building up a sharp antithesis between the civic greatness of the United States and the despotic infirmity of Great Britain. Sharply establishing the antithesis in the *exordium*, Adams elaborated it in a long narrative section that finally shifted into the core proposition of the speech, where Adams announced prophetically that *The Declaration of Independence* "was the cornerstone of a new fabric, destined to cover the surface of the globe". America, he declared, would eclipse the greatness of the British Empire as it fulfilled its providential destiny.

Finally arriving at his peroration, Adams brought his antithesis to an audacious climax by using apostrophe in presuming to address British listeners. "We shall not contend with you for the prize of music, painting, or sculpture", he exclaimed,

⁴² LaFeber, *Quincy Adams and American Continental Empire*, cit. in n. 37 above, pp. 13-27.

⁴³ Quoted in Bemis, *John Quincy Adams and the Foundations*, p. 243.

We will not ask you who was the last president of your Royal Academy. We will not name the inventor of the Cotton-Gin, for we fear that you would ask us the meaning of the word, and pronounce it a provincial barbarism...We shall leave you to inquire of your naval heroes their opinion of the Steam Battery and the Torpedo. It is not by the contrivance of agents of destruction, that America wishes to commend her inventive genius to the admiration or the gratitude of after times; nor is it even in the detection of the secrets, or the composition of new modifications of physical nature. Nor even is her purpose the glory of Roman ambition. Her glory is not dominion, but liberty. Her march is the march of the mind. She has a spear and a shield: but the motto upon her shield is, Freedom, Independence, Peace. This had been her Declaration; this has been, as far as her necessary intercourse with the rest of mankind would permit, her practice.⁴⁴

Augmenting his own popularity through his rousing denunciation of Great Britain, Adams had bundled all the key themes of Manifest Destiny: he had portrayed the United States as exempt from the corruption that degraded Britain and the other European societies; he had depicted the United States as uniquely virtuous. Fulfilling Divine Will, the United States would remain above reproach, *ipso facto*, as it marched on its own westward course of empire. The speech signaled that John Quincy Adams was ready to assume command of the nation that was, finally, ready to claim the future.

As President, between 1824 and 1828, John Quincy Adams sought to realize the vision of national greatness that he had envisioned in the soaring perorations of his pre-presidential demonstrative orations. Adams presented his program to the nation in the First Annual Message that he sent to Congress in December 1825. As new western territories became incrementally added to the union under federal provisions, new revenues would be generated to build a national transportation and educational system. The systematic cultivation of the nation's expanding

⁴⁴ John Quincy Adams, *Address delivered on the occasion of reading The Declaration of Independence Fourth of July, 1821* (Washington: Davis & Force, 1821) p. 31.

natural and human resources would provide "unfailing streams of improvement from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean".⁴⁵

Adams's resounding failure to fulfill his presidential aspirations is a commonplace of nineteenth-century history. In the mid-term election of 1826, a majority opposed to the administration was returned to both houses. His proposals, particularly threatening to the South, were blocked in Congress and lampooned in the opposition press. Frustrated as President and humiliated by his 1828 loss to Jackson, Adams was crushed by the deepening alcoholism, and probable suicide, of his eldest son in September of 1829.

How did Adams console himself during this grim period? By reading Cicero, who had mourned the death of a beloved daughter as Adams mourned the death of his son, and who was displaced by Julius Caesar as Adams had been by Andrew Jackson. In an 1830 diary entry, Adams wrote,

Every one of the letters of Cicero is a picture of the state of the writer's mind when it was written. It is like an evocation of shades to read them. I see him approach me like the image of a Fantasmagoria—he seems opening his lips to speak to me and passes off, but his words as if they had fallen upon my ears are left deeply stamped upon the memory. I watch with his sleepless nights. I hear his solitary sighs. I feel the agitation of his pulse, not for himself, but for his son, for his Tullia, for his country. There is something so much of it painful reality that I close the book. No tragedy was ever half so pathetic. My morning always ends with a hearty execration of Caesar, and with what is perhaps not so right, a sensation of relief at the 23 stabs of the Ides of March, and the fall at the feet of Pompey's statue.⁴⁶

Adams never stopped measuring himself by Cicero's life and words.

⁴⁵ Quoted in Bemis, *John Quincy Adams and the Union*, cit. in n. 30 above, p. 63.

⁴⁶ Adams, *Memoirs*, cit. in n. 26 above, vol. iii, pp. 247-48.

Embattled Defender of the Republic

Humiliated by Andrew Jackson in the election of 1828, Adams restored himself in the congressional elections of 1830. In becoming a congressman, Adams entered what he had described in *Lectures* as the epicenter of republican deliberation. Describing deliberative oratory, Adams had written, "the most important scenes of deliberative oratory in these states are the Congress of the union, and the state legislatures. The objects of their deliberations affect the interests of individuals and of the nation, in the highest degree".⁴⁷ Although he had longed for private life throughout the last two years of his presidency, he was fulfilling a *need* to be of service to the republic by accepting the invitation from several prominent Quincy citizens to run for Congress. His election to Congress was more gratifying than being chosen President. "No election or appointment conferred upon me ever gave me so much pleasure", he later wrote in his journal.⁴⁸ Evoking how much the decision was a renewal of his core Ciceronian self, Adams explained his return to public life writing, "For myself, taught in the school of Cicero, I shall say, 'defendi republicam adolescens; non deseram senex' [I will not desert in my old age the republic that I defended in my youth]".⁴⁹

In *Lectures on Rhetoric and Oratory* Adams had explained that rhetorical invention was coextensive with the whole repertoire of the orator's knowledge. Invention was the process of selecting, from the orator's accumulated store of information, what would be most effective in winning the assent of audiences in particular rhetorical contexts. During his post-presidential career, Adams brazenly enacted his Ciceronian conception of invention by making arguments that were strikingly dissonant with the well-established positions of his earlier career. He did so to win the assent of audiences in the rhetorically altered circumstances of the Jacksonian Period.

During his diplomatic career, Adams had attempted to unite the fledgling nation by appealing to a glorious millennial future;

⁴⁷ Adams, *Lectures*, vol i, p. 259.

⁴⁸ Quoted in Nagel, *John Quincy Adams*, cit. in n. 13 above, p. 336.

⁴⁹ Adams *Memoirs*, vol. viii, p. 247.

as a congressman, his aim was to save the republic from the "incubus of Jacksonianism" that had destroyed his presidency and seized power in 1828. As a congressman, with a new purpose, in changed circumstances, Adams developed arguments that inverted the positions he had taken during his diplomatic career. By 1844, when Secretary of State John Calhoun was attempting to use the treaty-making powers of the federal government to annex Texas, an enraged John Quincy Adams brandished shrill warnings against imperialist expansion. He made vexing pronouncements that secession would be preferable to membership in an expansive slave-empire. Contradicting the arguments of his youth, Adams was remaining true to his Ciceronian Self. He was using the most persuasive arguments at hand to save the imperiled foundations of the republic.

During the opening phase of his career in Congress, opposing Calhoun's nullification movement, Adams continued to defend the federal union and the expansive republican vision that he had promoted as President and Secretary of State. Yet after 1836, when the Jacksonians were attempting to annex Texas, he was ready to rend the union if it included Texas and adjoining Mexican territories. For nine years, between 1836 and 1845, Adams and his allies thwarted annexation by defending Mexico's sovereignty and by warning that overexpansion would wreck the civic foundations of the republic. Four speeches from Adams's congressional career dramatize his facility for adopting new arguments in changed rhetorical circumstances. The first was delivered to refute a core tenet of the 1836 Gag Rule that prohibited congressional consideration of slavery; the second was intended to mobilize opposition to President Tyler's 1843 effort to annex Texas. Adams made the third during the 1844 presidential election and the fourth while Congress was debating the "re-occupation" of Oregon in 1845.

On 25 May 1836 Adams delivered what became widely republished as *Speech on the Joint Resolution for Distributing Rations to the Distressed Fugitives from Indian Hostilities*. Adams originally made the speech to discredit a resolution passed by the House several days earlier asserting that Congress had no constitutional power to interfere with slavery in any of the states. When the House considered an emergency resolution for distributing food

rations to refugees from the Seminole Wars in Alabama and Georgia, Adams took the floor to argue that the same constitutional authority justifying aid to refugees of war would also justify congressional interference with slavery during wartime. Adams's provocative argument enraged the Southern bloc and helped galvanize Northern opposition to both the annexation of Texas and to the Gag Rule which had been enacted the day after Adams's declamation.⁵⁰

Moderate in tone and deductive in structure, the speech moves from a *logos* centered constitutional argument into a *pathos*-charged narration of possible unintended consequences of a war waged to expand slavery. The key constitutional argument of the speech is succinctly made in the *exordium* and repeated in the peroration: The House was voting to aid victims of war on the basis of the general constitutional power to declare war and provide for the common defense. That same power would also authorize Congress to interfere with slavery during wartime. Using his command of recent history, embellished with anecdotes from his tenure as Secretary of State, Adams described in lurid terms the way in which war with Mexico could become a conflagration involving Great Britain, France, revolting slaves, and warring Native tribes. "Are you ready for all these wars?", Adams provocatively asked:

A Mexican war? A war with Great Britain? A general Indian war? A servile war? Do you imagine that while in the very nature of things, your own Southern and Southwestern States must be the Flanders of these complicated wars, the battlefield upon which the last great conflict must be fought between slavery and emancipation; do you imagine that your Congress will have no constitutional authority to interfere with the institution of slavery in any way in the states of this confederacy?

As he had during his presidency, Adams was making a compelling case for an implied power of the Constitution. His argument would become embodied in the Emancipation Proclamation issued in January of 1863 to suppress the rebellion that had, indeed, made a Flanders of the Southern States. Yet enfolded into Adams's strikingly prescient constitutional

⁵⁰ Bemis, *John Quincy Adams and the Union*, p. 334-48.

argument was the classical assertion, rendered obsolete by the Federal Constitution, that a territorially extended republic would self-destruct. President Monroe, Adams claimed, had rejected the Rio Grande for the nation's southwestern boundary because such an expansive border "would make our union so heavy that it would break into fragments by its own weight". Explicitly denouncing expansion, Adams asked his fellow congressmen,

As to the annexation of Texas to your confederation, for what do you want it? Are you not large and unwieldy enough already? Do not two millions of square miles cover surface enough for the insatiate rapacity of your Landjobbers? Have you not Indians enough to expel from the land of their fathers' sepulchres, and to exterminate? What, in a prudential and military point of view, would be the addition of Texas to your domain? It would be a weakness, and not power. Is your Southern and South-Western frontier not sufficiently extensive? Why are you adding regiment after regiment of dragoons to your standing army?⁵¹

Congressmen who had watched Adams extend the national borders to the Pacific as Secretary of State must have listened with incredulity. His superannuated indictment of territorial expansion, which included a blistering denunciation of Jackson's Native American removal policy, blatantly contradicted the continentalism, and rhetoric of empire, that he had so forcefully articulated in the great demonstrative speeches of his early career. But Adams's archaic denunciation of expansion resonated with Northern audiences who feared the spread of slavery into the Southwest. The speech was reprinted in pamphlet form and became a staple in the propaganda war against the annexation of Texas.⁵²

In *Lectures on Rhetoric and Oratory*, Adams had claimed that orators were justified in fomenting the passions of listeners when a higher interest was at stake. "There are still occasions, in every class of public speaking", Adams had written, "when the orator may obtain his end by operating upon the passions of his hearers,

⁵¹ John Quincy Adams, *Speech of John Quincy Adams on the Joint Resolution for Distributing Rations to the Distressed Fugitives from Indian Hostilities in the States of Alabama and Georgia* (Washington: National Intelligence Office, 1836) p. 6.

⁵² Bemis, *John Quincy Adams and the Union*, p. 399.

and success obtained by these instruments is still the most difficult achievement and the most splendid triumph of the art".⁵³ For nine years, from 1836 until 1845, Adams sustained his campaign against Jacksonian expansion with stunning vehemence.

Barred from presenting anti-slavery petitions by the Gag Rule, Adams baited his Southern colleagues into debate by presenting petitions requesting that Congress mandate Southern states "to adopt a republican form of Government" by releasing all of its enslaved citizens. On another occasion he asked the speaker to rule on the propriety of hearing petitions purporting to come from slaves. At another time he submitted a petition from the citizens of Clarksville, Georgia, calling on Congress to remove Adams from his post as Chairman of the Committee on Foreign Affairs owing to the fact that he was "possessed of a species of monomania on all subjects connected with people as dark as Mexicans". Adams's parliamentary hand grenades sent Southern congressmen into paroxysms of fury and the entire Congress into contentious debate that opened new opportunities for "the Massachusetts Madman" to denounce the slave bloc and mobilize the Whig and abolitionist opposition.⁵⁴

By February 1843 Adams was preparing his most audacious effort to mobilize Northern opposition to Jacksonian expansion. "The time is not propitious for me to speak to my countrymen unpalatable truths", he wrote in his diary preparing his manifesto for publication. "I wish to leave behind me something which may keep alive the flame of liberty and preserve it in that conflict between slavery and freedom, which is drawing to its crisis".⁵⁵ At seventy-four years of age, Adams was preparing to steel the Northern States to sever the union as a final means of preserving it. Printed in the *National Intelligencer* on 4 May 1843, Adams's

⁵³ Adams, *Lectures*, vol. ii, p. 377.

⁵⁴ Adams's parliamentary war against the Southern bloc has been detailed by numerous Adams scholars. The most informative account of Adams's entire career in Congress is still S. F. Bemis, *John Quincy Adams and the Union*. The subject is also covered, more superficially, in Leonard L. Richards, *The Life and Times of Congressman John Quincy Adams* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986). The most recent biography of John Quincy Adams, Paul Nagel, *John Quincy Adams: A Public Life, A Private Life*, cit. in n. 13 above, also covers his congressional career in chapters 13, 14, and 15.

⁵⁵ Adams, *Memoirs*, cit. in n. 26 above, vol. xi, p. 359.

"Address to the People of the Free States of the Union" entreated its readers to lobby against the seizure of Mexican territories as a last means of preserving the union. After marshalling evidence that expansionists had been attempting to bring Texas into the union since Andrew Jackson's administrations, Adams presented his stunning proposition: annexing Texas would compel the North to secede from the slave states. "We hesitate not to say", Adams exclaimed,

that annexation, effected by any act or proceeding of the Federal Government, or any of its Departments, WOULD BE IDENTICAL WITH DISSOLUTION. It would be a violation of our national compact, its objects, designs and the great elementary principles which entered into its formation, of a character so deep and fundamental, and would be an attempt to eternize an institution and a power of nature so unjust in themselves, so injurious to the interests and abhorrent to the feelings of the people of the free states as, in our opinion, not only inevitably to result in a dissolution of the Union, but fully to justify it.

He ended the address imploring his readers to "unite, without distinction of party, in an immediate expression of your views on the subject".⁵⁶

Adams was throwing down the gauntlet. Annexation would compel the North to secede. He was matching the threat of Southern disunionists to withdraw from the union if Congress *did not* annex Mexico's Northern Territories. He was now brandishing arguments that he had vociferously condemned while opposing New England separatists during Jefferson's administration and during the nullification debate of the early 1830s. Heedless of ideological consistency, Adams was reaching for rhetorical effect. By openly calling for disunion, Adams was seeking to embolden Northern opponents and to unnerve Southern expansionists who were resolutely determined to annex Texas, precipitate war with Mexico, and spread slavery to the Pacific Ocean.

⁵⁶ John Quincy Adams, "Address to the people of the free states of the Union, Washington, March 3, 1843", reprinted in F. Merk, *Slavery and the Annexation of Texas* (New York: Knopf, 1972) pp. 205-11.

When Tyler's effort to annex Texas by treaty failed during a close Senate vote in June of 1844, Adams expressed his gratitude with a revealing analogy. In his diary he wrote,

I record this vote as a deliverance, I trust, by the special interposition of Almighty God, of my country and of human liberty from a conspiracy comparable to that of Lucius Sergius Catilina. May it prove not a mere temporary deliverance, like that, only preliminary to the fatally successful conspiracy of Julius Caesar! The annexation of Texas to this union is the first step to the conquest of all Mexico, the West India Islands, of a maritime, colonizing, slave-tainted monarchy, and of extinguished freedom.⁵⁷

Adams pictured his polemical battle against Jacksonian expansion in the image of Cicero's own Senatorial battle against the Catiline Conspiracy. He was still being inspired by Cicero's example.

John Quincy Adams's relief over the defeat of Texas annexation was short-lived. When the Democratic Party nominated James Polk as its 1844 presidential candidate on a platform of "re-annexing" Texas and "re-occupying" Oregon, Adams threw himself into the presidential campaign. On the eve of the election, he delivered his electrifying "Address at the Meeting of the Boston Whig Young Men's Club". The speech dramatizes how Adams viewed his crusade against Jacksonian expansion not only as a re-figuration of Cicero's own battle against autocracy, but as a continuation of the 1776 Revolution, which for Adams had always been symbolized by Cicero and embodied in the person of his own father.

"Address at the Meeting of the Boston Whig Young Men's Club" shows Adams, at seventy-seven years of age, still relying on the arsenal of Ciceronian weapons that he had fervently endorsed in *Lectures on Rhetoric and Oratory*. It was structured to refute the charge, implied in the very wording of the Democratic platform, that Adams had relinquished the nation's valid claim to Texas while negotiating the Treaty of 1819. Employing a plain style in the long refutation that opens the speech, Adams became animated expressing his proposition, and lifted into high Asiatic style in his peroration, where he implored his youthful audience to match the patriotism of the revolutionary generation.

⁵⁷ Adams, *Memoirs*, vol. xii, p. 49.

Adams opened the speech by reading the full text of a widely circulated letter, written by Andrew Jackson, that accused Adams of having needlessly ceded Texas to Spain in 1819. Agreeing "with the ancient Romans, that it was right never to cede any land or boundary of the Republic, but always to add to it by honorable treaty", Jackson had attempted the "retrocession" of Texas to the United States. Using evidence from his own diary and from other diplomatic documents, Adams meticulously refuted Jackson's charges with words that now fill four pages, three columns wide, of small print.

In the most biting passages of his refutation, Adams debunked Jackson's assertion that the ancient Romans had "extended the area of freedom" by gradually expanding their boundaries by treaty. Relying on his sure command of ancient history, Adams asked, with droll sarcasm, how much territory the Romans had acquired "by honorable treaty and how much by bloody and remorseless war?" Adams continued expatiating on the example of ancient Rome to ridicule Jackson and to reestablish his superannuated argument that republics could not expand without self-destructing. The Roman model of conquest, Adams told his listeners, would be the downfall of the American republic. "This Roman principle of perpetual aggrandizement, always adding and never ceding, is but another form of perpetual war, it is universal empire—it is the dream of avarice, stealing the clock of ambition. More pernicious advice no American statesman could ever give to his country. The Roman principle!"

Adams's listeners might well have fallen into a numbed daze listening to the long quotations and detailed exegesis of Adams's refutation. They would have snapped to attention, however, when Adams turned from refutation to assertion and shifted from plain to impassioned enunciation in making his proposition. Explaining that his long rebuttal had been necessary to exonerate his character from "the slanders of a knot of conspirators, venomous as the head of Medusa upon the shield of Perseus", Adams proceeded to condemn the Jacksonian conspiracy in an accumulation of clauses that sparked with all the rage he had been nursing since his defeat by Andrew Jackson in 1828. "The negotiation of the treaty for the annexation of Texas is", Adams charged,

by its absolutely putrid contagion with the canvass of the presidential election —by the petty larceny and highway robbery from Mexico— by the frenzy for aggrandizement which it would kindle in the active and adventurous spirit of our pioneer population—by its agency to preserve, extend, and perpetuate the moral infamy of domestic slavery—the most corrupt and vicious undertaking that ever disgraced this union.

If Adams's proposition did not sting his listeners wide awake, then his peroration, which quickly followed, surely did. In the same imploring tone that he had once used to inspire his Harvard students, Adams opened his peroration by quoting the pledge he had made in a 1793 Fourth of July Oration to remember "the instructive lesson of republican virtue" taught by the patriots who fought the American Revolution. With Adams's own generation "dropping into the grave", the flame of revolutionary zeal had to be preserved by the same young men whom Adams was addressing. "Young men of Boston", Adams declared, rising to the final lines of his peroration,

Your trial is approaching. The spirit of freedom and the spirit of slavery are drawing together for the deadly conflict of arms...Young men of Boston: burnish your armor, prepare for the conflict, and I say to you, in the language of Galgacus to the ancient Britons, think of your forefathers! Think of your posterity!⁵⁸

Widely distributed across the North and through the border states, Adams's "Address at the Meeting of the Boston Whig Young Men's Club" served as a powerful indictment of Polk's platform during the closing weeks of the campaign.⁵⁹ Suggesting the impact of the speech on the campaign, Jackson wrote, "who but a traitor to his country can appeal as Mr. Adams does to the youth of Boston in the close of his address: 'Your trial is approaching'?"⁶⁰

James Polk's narrow victory in 1844 made the annexation of Texas possible even before he had been officially inaugurated as

⁵⁸ J. Q. Adams, "At the Meeting of the Boston Whig Young Men's Club", *Niles' Register* 67 (October 19, 1844) pp. 105-11.

⁵⁹ Bemis, *John Quincy Adams and the Union*, p. 474.

⁶⁰ Quoted in Bemis, *John Quincy Adams and the Union*, p. 475.

President. As Tyler was pushing the annexation of Texas through Congress during the closing weeks of his administration, Adams expressed his dejection in the same conspiratorial language that he had used to express his exhilaration over the defeat of Annexation back in the spring of 1844. "The opposition is now confined to the mere mode of making the acquisition", he wrote in his diary on 19 February 1845. "The constitution is a menstrous rag and the union is sinking into a military monarchy, to be rent asunder like the empire of Alexander or the kingdoms of Ephraim and Judah."⁶¹ Undoubtedly sincere, Adams's despair was not absolute. Several months after writing this lament in his diary, the House began debating the "re-occupation" of Oregon. Enticed with the prospect of acquiring a vast northern territory for the expansion of free labor, the former secretary of state began burnishing the very same expansionist appeals that he had spent the last nine years condemning.

With Texas already annexed on the eve of his inauguration, Polk used his inaugural address to begin campaigning for Oregon. In defending the nation's claim to the Pacific Northwest, Polk explained that American pioneers were "already engaged in establishing the blessings of self-government in valleys of which the rivers flow to the Pacific". American sovereignty had to reach "the distant regions which they have selected for their homes". Ending his address, Polk emphatically concluded, "Our title to the country of Oregon, is clear and unquestionable".⁶² Polk's claim rested on the same premise that John Quincy Adams himself had used in justifying the Monroe Doctrine, that "the finger of nature" had reserved the Pacific Northwest for the United States.⁶³ While

⁶¹ Adams, *Memoirs*, vol. xi, p. 171.

⁶² Quoted in Bemis, *John Quincy Adams and the Union*, p. 475.

⁶³ In an 1823 dispatch to the American Minister to Great Britain, Adams had written: "It is not imaginable that, in the present condition of the world, any European nation should entertain the project of settling a colony on the Northwestern Coast of America; that the United States should form establishments there, with views of absolute territorial right and inland commerce, is not only to be expected, but is pointed out by the finger of nature." Quoted in F. Merk, *Manifest Destiny* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1963) p. 59. The presumption of Polk, and his strategists, that the Oregon Country was rightfully part of the United States is detailed in Frederick Merk, *The Monroe Doctrine and American Expansionism, 1843-1849* (New York: Vintage Books, 1966) pp. 65-105.

Polk rested his bid for Oregon on Adams's early statesmanship, the former Secretary of State showed Polk's propagandists how to add a few notches of biblical authority to their transcendental claim that Oregon was rightfully part of the United States.

When debate began in the House over terminating the joint occupancy of Oregon, expansionists found in Adams their most illustrious ally. Rebuking the Southern members who generally opposed the measure, Adams took the floor and echoed the argument that he had helped popularize in his 1802 oration commemorating the establishment of Plymouth Colony. "I do hold the title of the United States to be clear and unquestionable", he declared, utterly contradicting his erstwhile arguments against the annexation of Texas. He then asked the clerk to read the 26th, 27th, and 28th verses of the first chapter of Genesis, which culminates in God's admonishment for man to "be fruitful and multiply, and replenish the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth". "There Sir", he declared, "in my judgment is the foundation not only of our title to Oregon, but the foundation of all human title to all human possessions".⁶⁴

Having caught his listeners' attention, Adams proceeded to explain:

We claim that country for what? to make the wilderness blossom as the rose, to establish laws, to increase, multiply and subdue the earth, which we are commanded to do by the first behest of God Almighty. In contrast, the British wanted Oregon only to keep it open for navigation, for hunters to hunt the wild beasts...for the buffaloes, braves, and savages of the desert.⁶⁵

Adams had unabashedly reverted back to the transcendent argument that he had regularly made before his presidency. That afternoon the House passed a joint resolution requesting that the President give the twelve months' notice necessary for annulling the Convention of 1827.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ *Congressional Globe*, xv (29th Congress, 1st Session, 1845-6) pp. 338-42. Adams describes the entire occurrence in *Memoirs*, vol. xii, pp. 242-45.

⁶⁵ *Congressional Globe*, xv, p. 340.

⁶⁶ Bemis, *John Quincy Adams and the Union*, p. 491.

Fittingly, Adams's own sophistic appeal to biblical authority elicited the same type of denunciation that he had been hurling at the expansionist bloc for a decade. In the British Parliament, Lord George Bentinck denounced Adams for "impiously and blasphemously using the word of God as a justification for lighting up the firebrand and unleashing the hell-dogs of war".⁶⁷ In marshaling opposition to the expansion of slavery, Adams had appealed to the classical tradition of republican thought. In eliciting support for the expansion of free labor into the British Northwest, Adams was again evoking the new nation's millennial future. Again, he was acting on his belief that ideas are rhetorical weapons, not ideological absolutes; again, he was eschewing ideological consistency and adapting his polemical posture to defend transcendent ideals within the rhetorical context of the moment.

Students of John Quincy Adams have never been able to explain adequately the astounding contradictions in political position that Adams made over the course of his political career. As Steven Watts aptly remarks in *The Republic Reborn*, "John Quincy Adams was always difficult to like, often easy to admire, and sometimes impossible to understand".⁶⁸ If we see Adams as a nationalistic ideologue, an absolute believer in the nation's transcendent destiny, then his inconsistencies are not explainable; they simply remain enigmas. By appreciating how deeply Adams was rooted in the Ciceronian ideal that he articulated in his *Lectures on Rhetoric and Oratory*, his contradictions become perfectly understandable: throughout his long career he used the best argument available at any given moment to defend the transcendent ideals of the American Revolution.

Adams's abiding devotion to the Ciceronian ideal also explains the other enigma of his career, its astounding longevity. Adams could not let age, illness, or even death terminate his involvement in public life. Protecting the republic with his eloquence was essential to Adams's very being. On 20 November 1846 Adams suffered a cerebral haemorrhage while walking with

⁶⁷ Quoted in Bemis, *John Quincy Adams and the Union*, p. 492.

⁶⁸ S. Watts, *The Republic Reborn: War and the Making of Liberal America, 1790-1820* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987) p. 196.

a friend. Recovering his faculties after several days of rest, he explained in his diary that from the hour of his collapse "I date my decease, and consider myself, for every useful purpose to myself or to my fellow-creatures, dead; and hence I call this and what I may write hereafter a posthumous memoir".⁶⁹ Adams continued his "posthumous memoir" until 4 February 1848, nineteen days before his death.⁷⁰

Unable to retire from the struggle, Adams pushed on into his self-declared posthumous existence by returning to his congressional seat in February 1847. He had neither fulfilled his presidential vision, nor stopped the annexation of Texas, but the dogged old man had won the reverence of every power broker, deal-maker, and citizen in the capital. Describing Adams's return, Samuel Bemis writes,

When the ancient Plymouth member walked into the House for the first time after his illness, the members rose as one man to greet him. Proceedings were interrupted as two of his colleagues informally conducted him to his place...No one else now enjoyed as much prestige and respect in either house of Congress. He had become a patriarch, personifying the nation's history, venerated on both sides of the aisle by members from all sections, North, South, East, and West, a last personal link between George Washington and their own day, a son of the American Revolution mingling, as it were, among his posterity.⁷¹

Adams had become an icon of the contradictory impulses and principles that had held the union together for seventy years.

Deprived of all committee duties, excepting that of the Library of Congress, Adams continued attending congressional sessions. Too feeble to speak, he continued to vote on all resolutions considered by the full House. He was at his seat on Monday 21 February 1848, the same day that President Polk had received the Treaty of Guadalupe. The speaker was calling the ayes and noes on whether to consider resolutions "tendering the thanks of Congress and decorations to various generals for gallant actions in the campaigns of 1847". Adams responded with a clear,

⁶⁹ Adams, *Memoirs*, vol. xii, p. 279.

⁷⁰ Adams, *Memoirs*, vol. xii, editor's note, p. 271.

⁷¹ Bemis, *John Quincy Adams and the Union*, p. 529.

emphatic "No" to the resolution. It was his last word on the floor of Congress.

An abolitionist reporter was watching as Adams tried to rise, his temples flushing with color, only to collapse into the arms of David Fisher of Ohio who sat next to the Quincy congressman.⁷² Deliberations in the House, the Senate, and Supreme Court immediately halted with news of Adams' collapse. He was laid upon a sofa and carried into the speaker's room where he briefly regained consciousness and called for Henry Clay "who came in, and weeping clasped his hand and then departed".⁷³ He died on 23 February 1848, one day after the Senate approved a treaty of peace with Mexico that ceded to the United States an area larger than Spain, France, and Italy combined.⁷⁴ In twelve years the nation would be engulfed in the fratricidal war that Adams predicted would result from the seizure of Mexico's Northern Territories.

Memorials for the departed son of John Adams were held in state capitals across the country. "The funeral ceremonies in Washington and elsewhere", writes Samuel Bemis, "assumed the proportions and significance of a national pageant".⁷⁵ Old colleagues and former enemies voiced eloquent elegies to the aged statesman who had impeded the annexation of Texas for nearly a decade. Reacting to the scores of Southern orators who publicly honored their unyielding old foe, the upper chamber of the Virginia legislature tabled resolutions of mourning unanimously passed by the lower house.⁷⁶ Yet even the apostle of Southern rights, John Calhoun, was numbered among Adams's pallbearers. In death, John Quincy Adams had finally reached the pinnacle of his Ciceronian ambition. He had come to be recognized by friends and foes alike as a father of his country.

⁷² Account of H. B. Stanton, reported for the *Boston Emancipator and Republican*, 21 February 1848. Described in Bemis, *John Quincy Adams and the Union*, p. 535.

⁷³ Bemis, *John Quincy Adams and the Union*, p. 536.

⁷⁴ R. R. Miller, *Mexico: A History* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1985) p. 229.

⁷⁵ Bemis, *John Quincy Adams and the Union*, p. 538.

⁷⁶ Richards, *The Life and Times of Congressman John Quincy Adams*, cit. in n. 54 above, p. 203.