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Benjamin W. Hicks

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Introduction

The Greek historian, Plutarch, wrote his *Lives* in parallel, pairing a famous Greek figure with a Roman counterpart. For example, he paired the Greek orator Demosthenes with the Roman orator Cicero, Alexander the Great with Julius Caesar. He did so in response to his two audiences, his Roman associates, such as Mestrius Florus and Sosius Senecio, a valued advisor to the Emperor Trajan, and Greeks from his homeland.¹ By pairing his biographies, he invited his audience to place what was foreign and other into terms of what was familiar and known.

For the founders of the United States, the Classics played a similar function. In a land that had ties to British tradition but was still developing its own identity, antiquity provided a means of civic discourse. Men signed their names in newspapers under the epithets "Cato" and "Publius," evoking the memories of the ancient past. The framers of the Constitution looked to the Roman and Greek states for guidance. To be educated was to know Latin and Greek, and to have read the ancient historians and philosophers. But among the many talented men who founded the new nation, to seize the Latin idiom, who *condiderunt urbem* ("founded the city"), the Classics played a central role to none more so than John Adams, excepting perhaps only Thomas Jefferson². Adams grew up learning Latin and Greek, and received an education at Harvard where his knowledge of antiquity only grew deeper.

¹ Alex Wardman, *Plutarch's Lives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), 37-8.

² For an examination of Classical influences on Jefferson, see Benjamin Rumley, "The Power of a Lifelong Education: Classical Influences on Thomas Jefferson's Decision for War with the Barbary Pirates" (Honors Thesis, Washington and Lee University, 2004).

As an adult, Adams did not forget what he had learned from the pages of his favorite author, Cicero, and he took the lessons of the Roman Republic's collapse to heart. When he served as president, those lessons remained with him and prompted to him to see a new Caesar in Alexander Hamilton. During the United States's quasi-war with France from 1797 to 1800, Adams exerted every effort to keep Hamilton away from the high command of the Provisional Army (sometimes called the "New Army") that Congress had created. He feared that the pattern of an ambitious man at the head of an army destroying the republic—which Julius Caesar exemplified—would repeat itself in the United States,

To understand this crisis through Adams's eyes as best one can, the modern reader must first examine the president's education and try to comprehend the collapse of the Roman Republic. Only then, can he or she understand Adams's reaction to Hamilton and his fears of the New Army in the light he would have viewed them. In so doing, the situation invites us to create the same sort of parallels with antiquity as the Founders. In effect, it invites us to do as Plutarch did, and to explore the lives of Adams and Cicero, Hamilton and Caesar—in short, the effect that intertwining of the American experience and the Roman past had upon the presidency of John Adams.

him in Braintree's public Latin School, which was run by John Cleverly,

¹ John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, 21 December 1819, in *The Adams-Jefferson Letters: The Complete Correspondence Between Thomas Jefferson and Abigail and John Adams*, ed. Lester K. Born (Charlottesville: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 551.

² John Adams to M. de Lafayette, 21 May 1782, in *The Works of John Adams, Second President of the United States*, ed. Charles Francis Adams, 10 vols. (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1850-6), 7:393. Hereafter, *Works*.

Chapter I

In a letter dated 21 December 1819, near the twilight of his life, John Adams wrote to Thomas Jefferson, "To return to the Romans, I never could discover that they possessed much Virtue, or real Liberty there."³ And yet, in a letter to the Marquis de Lafayette in 1782, he had said, "I have the honour to be a republican on principle Two republican powers, Athens and Rome, have done more honour to our species than all the rest of it."⁴ These two contrasting opinions, one expressing the coolness of a man nearing the end of his days and the other the enthusiasm of his earlier years, encapsulate John Adams's relationship with antiquity and classical education. Both are genuine expressions of emotion, though one reacts to the negative examples of antiquity and the other to the positive. They reflect Adams's deep knowledge of antiquity, and the central position it possessed in his thoughts. From his youth to his death, the Classics remained a central part of Adams's intellectual life.

Adams received a superb education that steeped him in the knowledge of antiquity. His parents, John and Susanna Adams, taught their son to read and write at home, and then sent him to a dame school at a neighbor's house, where he chiefly studied the *New England Primer*. A few years after this, they enrolled him in Braintree's public Latin School, which was run by John Cleverly,

³ John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, 21 December 1819, in *The Adams-Jefferson Letters: The Complete Correspondence Between Thomas Jefferson and Abigail and John Adams*, ed. Lester J. Cappon (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 551.

⁴ John Adams to M. de Lafayette, 21 May 1782, in *The Works of John Adams, Second President of the United States*, ed. Charles Francis Adams, 10 vols. (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1850-6), 7:593. Hereafter, *Works*.

where he began preparation for a college career. The curriculum there could last as long as a dozen years. The curriculum began with the study of Latin grammar, then moved on to Latin texts and Greek grammar. Students were expected to have a thorough mastery of both. The curriculum emphasized the study of rhetoric and logic as a foundation for skilled speaking and writing.⁵

Learning did not endear the young Adams. He was disgusted by Cleverly's inattention to his students and developed a pronounced distaste for scholastic pursuits. He preferred playing in the outdoors with toy boats, flying kites, and shooting to learning from books, and asked his father to "lay aside the thoughts of sending me to Colledge." When asked what he would do with his life, the boy responded that he would like to be a farmer. The elder Adams took his son on a day's expedition to gather thatch, and after a hard day's work, asked Adams how he liked the work. Adams replied that he liked it "very well," and his father told him: "Ay but I dont like it so well: so you shall go to school today." Adams only began to acquire a desire to learn after he told his father that he disliked Cleverly's teaching and was enrolled in Joseph Marsh's private school.⁶ There, Adams gained a new desire for learning, and acquired a prized possession, a textbook edition of Cicero's *Orationes*.⁷ In 1751, after a year of schooling, Marsh pronounced the young Adams fit for college.

⁵ David McCullough, *John Adams* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001), 33; John Ferling, *John Adams: A Life* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press,), 12-3.

⁶ John Adams, *Diary and Autobiography of John Adams*, ed. L.H. Butterfield , 4 vols. (Cambridge: Belknap Press, Harvard University Press, 1961), 3:258; Hereafter *ADA*.

⁷ McCullough, *Adams*, 34.

To be admitted to Harvard, which Adams would eventually attend, aspiring pupils had to be able "extempore to read, construe, and parse Tully, Virgil, or such like common classical authors, and to write Latin in prose, and to be skilled in making Latin verse . . . and to read, construe, and parse ordinary Greek."⁸ This was, to be sure, no small task. On the day appointed for Adams to take the examination, the weather was foul and Marsh was sick, so Adams had to go to Cambridge alone. Summoning up his courage, the young boy faced his judges: President Edward Holyoke and three tutors. In his *Autobiography*, written in 1820, Adams recalled the trial:

Mr. Mayhew into whose Class We were to be admitted, presented me with a Passage of English to translate into Latin. It was long and casting my Eye over it I found several Words the latin for which did not occur to my memory. Thinking that I must translate it without a dictionary, I was in a great fright and expected to be turned by, an Event that I dreaded above all things. Mr. Mayhew went into his Study and bid me follow him. There Child, said he is a dictionary, there a Grammar, there Paper, Pen and Ink, and you may take your time The Latin was soon made, I was declared Admitted and a Theme given me, to write on in the Vacation.⁹

For beginning students, the curriculum at Harvard in 1723 reviewed Latin and Greek and began the study of Hebrew.¹⁰ It also required weekly debates in Latin. More advanced students read books on philosophy (Bartholomäus Keckermann's *Systema Logicae*, to name one), natural philosophy, and astronomy.¹¹ The

⁸ Carl J. Richard, *The Founders and the Classics: Greece, Rome, and the American Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 19.

⁹ *ADA*, 3:259-60.

¹⁰ Richard M. Gummere, *The American Colonial Mind and the Classical Tradition: Essays in Comparative Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963), 63.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 63.

medieval "trivium" of rhetoric, logic, and grammar along with the "quadrivium" of arithmetic, music, geometry, and astronomy formed the core of the curriculum.¹²

His experiences at Harvard remained a touchstone for Adams for the rest of his life, and his connection to the lessons of antiquity played a central part of his thinking. He later regretted that he had spent more time on mathematics and natural philosophy because, given his "Course of Life," he thought that "the Classicks would have been of great Importance."¹³ He was, however, a superb scholar and one of five students selected to give a "Syllogistic Disputation" at his graduation from Harvard in 1755, so his complaints about his lack of skill in Classics were more expressions of his own self-doubt than actual reflections of his lack of Classical learning.¹⁴

The personal value of the Classics constantly bubbled forth in Adams's daily life and his interactions with others. The writings of Cicero, the renowned Roman statesman and orator, held a particularly cherished place. When he sought inspiration, comfort, or strength, Adams turned to the pages of Cicero. As a young lawyer preparing for his first case, he used Cicero's *Orations* to steel himself mentally. He recorded in his diary, "The Sweetness and Grandeur of the Harmony of his Numbers give Pleasure enough to reward the Reading if one

¹² Richard, *Founders and Classics*, 20.

¹³ *ADA*, 3:262.

¹⁴ Richard, *Founders and Classics*, 21.

understood none of his meaning."¹⁵ Only a few days later, after a familial dispute involving his father's decision to board a young woman named Judah, Adams again felt the need to retreat to Cicero in order to soothe his nerves.¹⁶ Even decades later in 1820, Adams wrote in a letter to a friend, "I can read Cicero's de Senectute [On Old Age], because I have read him for almost seventy years and seem to have him by heart."¹⁷

Adams minced no words in urging his children, particularly John Quincy, to study the great works of antiquity. His own experiences with his father, who successfully pushed him to study hard, and his regret at having been a less than enthusiastic student perhaps goaded Adams to ensure that his progeny would not repeat his mistake. He never ceased urging them to explore history and great works of literature, among which the works of antiquity held the first rank. In a letter to John Quincy in 1777, he instructed his son, "It is this, that a Taste for Literature and a Turn for Business, united in the same Person, never fails to make a great Man."¹⁸ In the same letter, Adams included a line of Latin, with instructions that when he saw him again that he should be able to "give . . . the Construction of the Line, and the Parsing of every Word in it."¹⁹ Later that year,

¹⁵ ADA, 1: 63; McCullough, *Adams*, 45.

¹⁶ ADA, 1:65.

¹⁷ Joseph Ellis, *Passionate Sage: The Character and Legacy of John Adams* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1993), 176.

¹⁸ John Adams to John Quincy Adams, 16 March 1777, *Adams Family Correspondence*, ed. L.H. Butterfield, 6 vols., (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963-73), 2:177; Hereafter AFC.

¹⁹ AFC, 2:178.

when he was contemplating how John Quincy could best study the arts of oratory and statecraft, Adams recommended Thucydides' history of the Peloponnesian War.²⁰ Even while he was serving as an emissary to France in Paris, Adams found the time to admonish his sons, once giving John Quincy a mild rebuke for his sloppy penmanship.²¹ When the Congress transferred Adams to Amsterdam to try to solicit Dutch support for the Revolution, he made sure that his sons were enrolled in the city's renowned Latin school.²² In 1785, John Quincy returned to America to enroll in Harvard, required some remedial tutoring in Greek, and did not begin his work there in 1786.²³ His father proudly wrote to Benjamin Waterhouse, a family friend who had arranged tutors for the Adams boys while they were in Europe, on behalf of his son's admission:

If you were to examine him in English and French poetry, I know not where you would find a youth possessed of so much knowledge. He has translated Virgil's *Aeneid*, Suetonius, the whole of Sallust, Tacitus's *Agricola*, his *Germany*, and several books of his *Annals*, a great part of Horace, some of Ovid, and some of Caesar's commentaries, in writing, besides a number of Tully's orations.²⁴

Adams then went on to list an equally impressive listing of Greek works with which his son was familiar, including selections from Aristotle, Plutarch's *Lives*, Lucan, Xenophon, and Homer's *Iliad*. Charles Francis Adams followed his older brother to Harvard a few years later, though his father had to remind him even

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 2:307.

²¹ McCullough, *Adams*, 236.

²² *Ibid.*, 247.

²³ *Ibid.*, 364.

²⁴ Adams, *Works*, 9.530-1.

more forcefully to adopt good study habits.²⁵ Clearly, Adams never allowed his progeny to grow slack in their pursuit of knowledge. Of even greater significance to the fledgling United States and to posterity was the effect of the Classics on Adams's political thought. Adams described himself as "a Republican on principal" and wrestled with the dilemma of how to protect a republican government from itself.²⁶ Carl Richard, in his work on classical influences on the founders, argues that antiquity provided models and anti-models for the founders. Cincinnatus, the legendary Roman hero who put down his plow and took up a generalship, only to relinquish it willingly when his task was done, provided the archetype of the noble citizen. Julius Caesar who helped bring the Republic crashing down, along with the men who followed after him as emperors, provided the archetype of a nemesis to liberty and republicanism. Likewise, Cicero, an opponent of Catiline and later Caesar, personified the defense of republican institutions. The Romans and their society became the examples the founding fathers used to examine the events of their own time.²⁷

The profound power of positive and negative archetypes from antiquity shaped Adams's thoughts. His advocacy of mixed government, that is, a government in which the features of democracy, monarchy, and aristocracy were

²⁵ McCullough, *Adams*, 365.

²⁶ See note 2.

²⁷ See Richard, *Founders and Classics*, 53-122 for his examination of models and anti-models, taken at a length not possible here.

blended to provide a balance of powers owed much to the negative and positive examples of antiquity. The root of his conviction that mixed constitutions were vastly superior to all other alternatives lay in notions distilled in Cicero's *De Republica* (On the Republic) and also in the constitution of Lycurgus, the mythical founder of the Greek city-state, Sparta, described in Plutarch's *Lives*.

In *De Republica*, Cicero argued that a mixed constitution avoided the problems resulting from the collapse of simple forms of government—monarchies, aristocracies, and democracies—into their negative counterparts. Scipio Africanus, the conqueror of Carthage, whom Cicero used as his mouthpiece in the fictional dialogue of *De Republica*, makes the lesson unmistakably clear:²⁸

Nam vel rex aequus ac sapiens vel delecti ac principes cives vel ipse populus, quamquam id est minime probandum, tamen nullis interiectis iniquitatibus aut cupiditatibus posse videtur aliquo esse non incerto statu.²⁹

For whether a just and wise king, or the select and principal citizens, or the people itself—although they are the least excellent—nevertheless, with no inequities or greeds intervening, it seems that it is possible for anyone of these to be in a not unstable state.

The simple forms of government exist only so long as human vice does not disturb them. The great danger lies in the tendency of virtue to succumb to vice. The good king is overwhelmed by the cruel tyrant, the aristocracy by the oppressive oligarchy, and democracy by mob rule.³⁰ The remedy to these threats,

²⁸ The date for the fictional dialogue, composed from 54-51 BC is purportedly 129 BC. The main exposition of ideas comes from Publius Cornelius Scipio Africanus the Younger, the renowned conqueror of Carthage. See Clinton Walker Keyes, ed., introduction to *De Republica*, by Cicero (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977), 2-3.

²⁹ Cic. *Rep.* 1.42

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 1.44

the mixed constitution, allows the various factions of the state—the people, the aristocrats, and the king—to balance one another and each to prevent the others from dominating the government and exploiting it in their own interests. To support this contention, Africanus recalls Romulus's mythical creation of the Roman kingship, the formation of the Senate and the system of client-patron relationships that served to bind Roman lower and upper-classes.³¹ This balanced commonwealth does not "*puniendo inritet animum inmanem ac ferum*" (stir up with punishment the fierce and inhuman heart).³² Lycurgus's system established a government for the Spartans in which two kings presided over a council of elders called *gerontes*, a government similar to the Roman system in which, after the overthrow of the monarchy, the two annually elected consuls and the Senate directed the state.³³

Adams believed that a republic based on a mixed constitution was preferable to any other form of government. He did not, however, agree with some of his more liberal contemporaries such as Thomas Jefferson that a popular government would lead to an egalitarian society. In a letter to Jefferson in 1813, he wrote, "Inequalities of Mind and Body are so established by God Almighty in his constitution of Human Nature that no Art or policy can ever plain them down to a Level."³⁴ He did not think that the United States ought to promote what he

³¹ Ibid., 2.15.

³² Ibid., 2.40.

³³ Plut. *Lyc.* 6-8.

³⁴ Ellis, *Sage*, 132.

termed an "artificial" aristocracy—a group of men placed in power by civil law, but he did believe that the development of a "natural" aristocracy was inevitable because of the disparities in wealth, talent, and intelligence inherent in humankind.³⁵

As a consequence, government needed to balance the interests of the elite, the *aristoi*, and the common people. For example, in his *Defence of the Constitutions of the Government of the United States of America*, published in the 1780s, Adams argued strongly against the notions of the French philosopher and statesman Turgot, who asserted that the new governments in the United States ought to have unicameral legislatures.³⁶ He continued this argument in his "Discourses on Davila," written in 1790 in response to the historian Henrico Caterino Davila's examination of the sixteenth-century French civil wars.³⁷ Adams minced no words in attacking a simple legislature: "A legislature, in one assembly, can have no other termination than in civil discord, feudal anarchy, or simple monarchy."³⁸ Separating the legislature into upper and lower houses made it more difficult for an oligarchy to gain control of the entire legislature. At most,

³⁵ John R. Howe, Jr., *The Changing Political Thought of John Adams* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), 89, 138-9.

³⁶ Ellis, *Sage*, 145, 148.

³⁷ All of Adams's writings, including these two, pose many problems, not the least of which is their presentation. They liberally quote from other sources, with or without attribution, and are something closer to compendiums of his thoughts, rather than coherent works of philosophy. See Ellis, *Sage*, 147-8.

³⁸ Adams, *Works*, 6:273.

it might control the upper house, but a divided government was more difficult to corrupt than a simple one³⁹

The virtue of the Spartan and Roman constitutions, according to Adams, was their ability to restrain the natural tendency of men to seek and exploit power.⁴⁰ He conceded, however, that they could only be successful in this "in some measure, for a long period, but never perfectly."⁴¹ In their lack of stability lay the problem that troubled the classical republic, and more particularly, the Roman Republic. The great military dynasts—Cornelius Sulla, Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus, and finally, Julius Caesar—had used their incredible personal power and fortunes for their own ends and, ultimately, to the detriment of the Republic.⁴² The problem of the "great man" who transcended the power of the law clearly troubled Adams, and he returned to it time and again in his writings. Adams repeatedly pondered the desire of humankind to grasp for power. Human beings, he observed, sought distinction. When their passion, as he put it, "aims at power, as a means of distinction, it is *Ambition*."⁴³ Regulating ambition was the "principal end of government." The harnessed power of ambition could then

³⁹ Ellis, *Sage*, 152-3; Adams's notion of using the upper branch of the legislature to confine the aristocracy and to harness their power came in part from the work of John Louis DeLolme, *The Constitution of England*.

⁴⁰ Adams, *Works*, 6:165.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 165.

⁴² For a discussion of the military dynasts, see Michael Crawford, *The Roman Republic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 170-186; See also chapter two of this work.

⁴³ Adams, *Works*, 6:233.

become "the principal means of government," just as in the past power left unharnessed had been the cause of its downfall.⁴⁴

To thwart the consequences of human vice, Adams called for a mixed constitution but added two stipulations. First, he noted that "[t]he balance between three branches [of government] alone is adequate to this end"⁴⁵ Indeed, he acknowledged that the separation of powers was the only real contribution to the art of government since "the institution of Lycurgus."⁴⁶ Second, Adams emphasized the need for the government to erect equitable laws and to apply them to all its citizens. In the 1779 draft of the Massachusetts constitution, Adams wrote in Clause XXX of Chapter I, "It is essential to the rights of every individual, his life, liberty, property and character, that there be an impartial interpretation of the laws, and administration of justice."⁴⁷ If the first point built on the positive example of antiquity, the mixed governments of Rome and Sparta, the second reacted to the negative example—the collapse of the Republic. A disregard for the constitution and the rule of law had allowed the military dynasts to acquire enormous power through unconstitutional commands and through abuse of the dictatorship which granted supreme power for a year.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Ibid., 6:234.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 6:165.

⁴⁶ Adams, *Works*, 4:284.

⁴⁷ John Adams, "The Report of a Constitution or Form of Government for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts," in *The Papers of John Adams*, ed. Robert J. Taylor, 10 vols, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977), 8:242.

⁴⁸ See Crawford, *Roman Republic*, 151-3, 155 for examples of Sulla's use of the dictatorship and Pompey's extraordinary command to quell piracy in the Mediterranean. See also chapter 2 of this thesis.

By arguing for the strict adherence to the law and the creation of a divided government, Adams hoped to avoid these sorts of abuses.

Antiquity and the Classics provided John Adams insights into a world in which the virtue of Cincinnatus contrasted with the corruption of Caesar. He grew up reading Cicero's denunciations of Catiline for betraying the Republic. He took the lessons he learned from these men and applied them to his own time.

They profoundly shaped the way he viewed the world and the people in it, especially politicians who might otherwise have succumbed to their own powerful ambitions and served themselves rather than the state and the people. Adams took the warnings of antiquity to heart. He stated, "When Caesar declared that he had lived enough to glory, Caesar might deceive himself, but he did not deceive the world, who saw his declaration contradicted by every action of his public life."⁴⁹

The Classics taught Adams to be mindful of the "Caesars" around him and compelled him to create a government that could resist the ambitious and to remain constantly vigilant lest his own republic follow the fate of Rome's.

⁴⁹ Adams, *Works*, 6:219.

Chapter II

Adams's fears of the "exceptional man" and the harm such a man could potentially inflict on the fledgling United States stemmed in large measure from his knowledge of the Roman Republic. The figure of Julius Caesar, who triumphed over his foes and became a virtual dictator, encompassed the paradox facing a free society. Its best men could greatly strengthen and enrich it with their talents, but they could also destroy it in the name of personal glory or honor. For Adams, his window into that time of revolution and terror for the Roman people was the writing of Cicero. And that window, to continue the metaphor, tinted his perspective on antiquity with a distinctly moral tone.

More than a century later, during the height of the Roman Empire under Trajan, the historian Tacitus claimed that he wrote his *Annals* "*ne virtutes sileantur utque pravis dictis factisque ex posteritate et infamia metus sit*" (that virtues might not be silent and that infamy from posterity might be a terror to evil words and deeds).⁵⁰ His statement expressed an attitude that suffused Roman rhetoric and held as true for Cicero as it did for Tacitus. He was not at all interested in portraying events objectively and dispassionately, as would a modern historian. Likewise, during and after the Roman civil wars, Cicero believed Caesar's actions reprehensible and made Caesar an example of the overambitious,

⁴⁹ The *cursus honorum* involved the legally adjudicated path an aspiring young politician should take through the offices. Usually, he began with the position of quaestor (a quaestor was for a general in the field) and moved into other positions from there. The consulship, as noted above, represented the pinnacle. See Michael Crawford, *The Roman Republic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 73.

⁵⁰ Tac. *Ann.* 3.65.

talented man who placed his own good ahead of the *res publica*.⁵¹ To be sure, Cicero had harsh words for men such as Sulla and Pompey who established the pattern Caesar followed, but he focused most intently on Caesar as the most visible and powerful example.

To understand the arguments and fears that Cicero expressed, a student of antiquity must first examine Rome during the last decades of the first century B.C., when it was undergoing radical political, social, and economic change. Its founders had originally conceived of the Roman Republic as a government for a city-state that at best controlled only a portion of the Italian peninsula, but it now ruled the Mediterranean as an undisputed hegemon. The state was controlled by elite families that controlled most offices and guarded the consulship—the pinnacle of the *cursus honorum* (the "course of offices") and the chief executive in Rome, held by two men annually—with a particular jealousy.⁵² This office, much like the rest of the magistracies, was elected annually to administer the government. Such a system worked well for a small city-state, but it did not provide effectively for the exigencies of administering provinces abroad.⁵³ This

⁵¹ The phrase *res publica* is imperfectly translated as "commonwealth" or "republic." The phrase can have a multitude of meanings, from simply the state to the specific form of governance used in Rome. For an exhaustive listing, see *OLD*, s.v. "res publica."

⁵² The *cursus honorum* involved the legally adjudicated path an aspiring young politician should take through the offices. Usually, he began with the position of *quaestor* (a quartermaster for a general in the field) and moved into other positions from there. The consulship, as noted above, represented the pinnacle. See Michael Crawford, *The Roman Republic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 73.

⁵³ For a general synopsis of Roman government during the republic, see Michael Crawford, *The Roman Republic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 22-30; H. H. Scullard, *From the Gracchi to Nero: A History of Rome from 133 B.C. to A.D. 68* (London:

impasse created the need to prorogue, that is, to extend the term of command, of existing magistrates to serve the needs of the republic. For example, once a man had served as a consul, the Senate could grant him proconsular powers to administer a province in the place of the consul. Beyond the legal proroguing of powers, the exigencies of empire also compelled the Senate to ratify extraordinary commands that, if not contrary to the letter of the law, were certainly contrary to its spirit. Extended tenures of command in provinces or commands of greatly extended scope became increasingly common as the Roman state subjugated more peoples.

The highest tiers of government, the consulship and governorships of provinces which entailed military commands, also offered unprecedented opportunities for their occupants to gain wealth and power. Campaigns against foreign peoples produced wealth and allowed a successful general, an *imperator*, to accrue both fame and the loyalty of legions personally sworn to him. However, the pinnacle of the *cursus honorum* remained fixed at two consuls, and the fruits of empire created fierce competition for the most esteemed position in the state. Further, the strains produced by social concerns such as the rise of the *latifundia*, large estates worked primarily by slave labor, and a decrease in the number of free citizens created internal conflict within the state.⁵⁴ The efforts of Tiberius

Methuen and Co., 1970), 1-19 provides a concise overview of the rise of Rome's power in the Mediterranean and also discusses the problems of empire.

⁵⁴ Plutarch in his *Tiberius Gracchus* painted a picture of a dwindling population of freeholders and a growth in the number of slaves throughout the Italian countryside. The young Tiberius Gracchus reported "τὴν ἐρημίαν τῆς χῶρας ὀρῶντα καὶ τοὺς γεωργοῦντας ἢ

Gracchus to use the tribunate⁵⁵ and its power to veto senatorial legislation to force agrarian reform led his opponents to gather a mob and lynch him on the steps of the temple of Jupiter Capitolinus in 132 BC.⁵⁶ His brother suffered a similar fate for continuing his elder brother's reforms and antagonizing the *optimates*, when the Senate passed the first *senatus consultum ultimum* (final decree of the Senate) against him in 121 B.C. The *consultum ultimum* amounted to a declaration of martial law and resulted in conflict that left Gaius and three thousand of his followers dead—a bloody prelude to the later civil wars that destroyed the Republic.⁵⁷

The Senatorial class did not wish to extend Roman citizenship to the Italian allies, and that reluctance led to the eruption of the Social War in 91 BC. The allies rebelled against Rome in order to gain the rights of citizens.⁵⁸ Underlying these conflicts was a division between two factions of the Senatorial class, the *optimates* (the "best men") and the *populares*. In general, the *optimates* sided with the interests of the Senatorial classes and sought to keep the Roman government firmly under the control of their own members, and the *populares*

νέμοντας οικήτας ἐπισάκτους καὶ βαρβάρους" (seeing the desolation of the land and that the ones farming and tending the flocks were imported slaves and barbarians) (8.7).

⁵⁵ The Tribunes of the Plebs, elected annually from the plebian class, could propose legislation to the Senate or veto any legislation. A tribune was sacrosanct and his person was protected by oath. The distinction between plebian and patrician was not a matter of wealth but rather of lineage. See Crawford, *Roman Republic*, 24-5.

⁵⁶ The problem of the Gracchi in Roman history is far too complex to address within this paper. On Tiberius and Gaius Gracchus, see Scullard, *Gracchi to Nero*, 23-44. Also see David Stockon, *The Gracchi* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979).

⁵⁷ Stockon, *The Gracchi*, 197-8.

⁵⁸ Scullard, *Gracchi to Nero*, 66.

courted the favor of the *equites*, the mercantile class, and more generally, the common people—the plebs.⁵⁹ With these factional differences as a backdrop, the most prominent men in Rome competed for wealth and honor. The most fundamental element of Roman political life was the quest for *dignitas*, that is, for public recognition of glory and power.⁶⁰ This competition set the stage for the rise of the military dynasts. These men exploited their political positions to make themselves so powerful that they could act virtually unopposed, regardless of the will of the Senate. Three of the most powerful of these men were Cornelius Sulla, Pompeius Magnus, and Julius Caesar. Though their lives and aims differed, of course, these men came to exemplify the power that the generals held over the Roman state.

Sulla rose to power during the beginning of the first century B.C. His family—the Cornelii—was of old patrician stock, and Sulla made a name for himself by his actions in the Social War. His career carried him into dispute with the Popular faction led by the venerable general, Gaius Marius, who had opened enrollment in the legions to all free male citizens, rather than restricting it to citizens who met the property requirement. In 88, the Senate awarded Sulla command in the East against the forces of King Mithridates, the King of Pontus, who was trying to expand his kingdom. A tribune, Sulpicius Rufus, who sided with the Marian faction, then secured the transfer of his command to Marius. In

⁵⁹ The *Equites* helped fill a niche in the power structure of Rome created by the *lex Claudia* of 218 B.C., which forbade Senators from undertaking in 218. See Scullard, *Gracchi to Nero*, 9.

⁶⁰ Ronald Syme, *The Roman Revolution* (London: Oxford University Press, 1960), 11.

the ensuing chaos, Sulla appealed to the army to help him recover his command, and took a fateful step. He marched on Rome itself. After forcing the Senate to accede to his wishes, he then fought a brilliant campaign against Mithridates, capped by a climatic victory at Chaerona. In 85, the king agreed to terms, and in 83, Sulla returned to Italy to deal with problems at home. The faction of Marius, joined by Cornelius Cinna, had taken Rome in 87 and declared Sulla a public enemy. After a brief struggle, Sulla again took Rome and then managed to subdue all of Italy, though some resistance continued until around 80.⁶¹

Sulla ruled as dictator until 79, and in 78 stepped down and returned home as a private citizen.⁶² While he was dictator, however, he used the absolute authority of the office to carry out a series of reforms to curb the power of demagogues—and by extension, of the *populares*—to influence the state. He proscribed many *equites*—that is, sentenced them to death and confiscated their property—denied tribunes the right to seek other offices, and revoked their right to propose legislation to the Senate.⁶³ These reforms lasted for only a few years before another of the military dynasts, Gnaeus Pompeius—who had himself

⁶¹ Scullard, *Gracchi to Nero*, 58, 67-8, 71-2, 75-81.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 82.

⁶³ Lily Ross Taylor, *Party Politics in the Age of Caesar* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1949), 19. The proscription condemned a man to death and also confiscated his estate.

served as a chief lieutenant of Sulla—overturned the changes during a consulship he served in 70 BC alongside Licinius Crassus, another Sullan associate.⁶⁴ Pompey gained this position by using a method that was becoming dangerously common. After putting down the rebellion led by the gladiator Spartacus, he and Crassus held their armies outside Rome—posing an obvious threat to use violence—until the Senate ratified his demand to be made consul, even though he was six years too junior to take the position.⁶⁵ Pompey then went on to a series of distinguished commands, including a hugely successful and rapid campaign against the Mediterranean pirates, followed by a campaign against Mithridates who was again causing trouble. This latter command was particularly notable because it allowed Pompey to retain the provinces granted to him during his campaign against the pirates in addition to the ones he gained in the fight against Mithridates.⁶⁶ He later served a term as a consul without a colleague in 52, a situation that was equally unprecedented.⁶⁷

The culmination of the military dynasts was Julius Caesar, the man against whom Cicero reacted most fiercely in his *De Officiis*. His early career, though, was surprisingly traditional, especially given the examples of Sulla and Pompey. He moved up through the ranks of the *cursus honorum* in the regular order,

⁶⁴ Scullard, *Gracchi to Nero*, 97.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 79. The act of ratifying Pompey's consulship annulled the *lex Annalis* of Sulla.

⁶⁶ Scullard, *Gracchi to Nero*, 99-101.

⁶⁷ Grant, *Roman Republic*, 167, 181.

though he marked himself early on for his bravery.⁶⁸ When Sulla as dictator ordered him to divorce his wife in order to become a *flamen dialis*, a priest of Jupiter subject to many restrictions—bizarre even to the Romans—such as not seeing troops in arms or mounting a horse, Caesar resisted.⁶⁹ His family, the Julii, was patrician though not particularly distinguished.⁷⁰ He and Cicero, the latter a "*novus homo*" (a "new man" to the political scene in Rome) from the town of Arpinum and the household of a Roman knight, were political allies on several occasions and argued strenuously for Pompey's command against Mithridates.⁷¹ Through his connections with Pompey and with Crassus (the "First Triumvirate"), Caesar managed to gain a command against the Gauls as consul in 59 and conquered all of Transalpine Gaul from 58 to 50.⁷²

Caesar's growing fame and popularity threatened Pompey and Crassus, and Pompey began to withdraw his support from his former political ally and to court the affections of the *optimates*, who by this point were extremely hostile towards Caesar. In 55, the three men met at Luca in hopes of reaching an agreement. Crassus and Pompey each received the consulship for the year, and Caesar had his command extended for another five years.⁷³ This rapprochement

⁶⁸ See Matthias Gelzer, *Caesar: Politician and Statesman*, trans. Peter Needham (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968), 335-7 for a brief chronology of Caesar's life.

⁶⁹ Gelzer, *Caesar*, 21; Suetonius, *Caes.* 1.2

⁷⁰ Gelzer, *Caesar*, 19.

⁷¹ Scullard, *Gracchi to Nero*, 100;

⁷² Grant, *Roman Republic*, 155.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 180.

did not last long. In 52, Pompey passed a law enforcing a five year interval between holding a provincial command and running for office, but Caesar hoped to move straight to a consulship in 50, in order to retain a magistrate's immunity from prosecution.⁷⁴ In 49, after being ordered by the Senate to lay down his armies and provinces, Caesar crossed the Rubicon with the exhortation: "*Eatur . . . quo deorum ostenta et inimicorum iniquitas vocat. Iacta alea est*" (Let us go where the portents of the gods and the injustice of my enemies calls. The die is cast.).⁷⁵

Before this rupture, Cicero had attempted to mend the rift between *optimates* and Caesar. During the series of negotiations between Caesar and the Senate, he had supported an agreement in which Caesar would give up Gaul in exchange for retaining Illyricum and two legions.⁷⁶ But when civil war broke out, Cicero sided with the *optimates* and Pompey against Caesar. In a letter written in 56, Cicero reflected on his mixed feelings:

Cuius me mei facti paenituit non tam propter periculum meum quam propter vitia multa, quae ibi offendi quo veneram, primum neque magnas copias neque bellicosas; deinde extra ducem paucosque praeterea (de principibus loquor) reliqui primum in ipso bello rapaces, deinde in oratione ita crudeles ut ipsam victoriam horrorem . . . Nihil boni praeter causam.

I regretted my actions [i.e., joining the Pompeian faction] not so much because of the danger to me as because of the many weaknesses that I encountered when I had arrived there [Pompeii's camp at Dyrrachium, Greece] : First, there were neither great numbers of troops nor were the

⁷⁴ Ibid., 181.

⁷⁵ Suet. *Caes.* 32.

⁷⁶ Plut. *Caes.* 31.

troops particularly prepared for battle. Then, aside from the commander and a few others (I speak about the leading men), I found them greedy for plunder in the war itself and so cruel in speaking that I shuddered at victory itself . . . There was nothing good except the cause.⁷⁷

Although he was disgusted by the actions of the *optimates*, he could not bring himself to ally himself with Caesar and against his beloved *res publica*.⁷⁸

The civil wars culminated in Caesar's victory over Pompey at Pharsalus in 48 and were followed by the triumphant dictator's assassination in the Senate four years later.⁷⁹ Cicero attempted to steer the battered Republic away from the hands of Caesar's would-be successors, Marc Antony and Octavian. In 44 B.C., just after he delivered his *First Phillipic* against Antony, Cicero departed for his estate at Puteoli and began work on *De Officiis* (On Duties).⁸⁰ He modeled his work on the Stoic philosopher Panaetius's *περὶ τοῦ καθήκοντος* (On Duty).⁸¹ His work took the form of a letter of advice to his son Marcus on civic responsibilities, and it focused on the dangers posed by overly-powerful individuals to the republic.⁸² In the aftermath of Caesar's assassination, Cicero finally gave vent to his

⁷⁷ Cic. *Fam.* 7.3.1.

⁷⁸ See Anthony Everitt, *Cicero: The Life and Times of Rome's Greatest Politician*, (New York: Random House, 2001), 210-15; Cicero was concerned about Pompey's motivations also, but he chose the side of the *Optimates* over that of Caesar.

⁷⁹ See Grant, *Roman Republic*, 216 for a timeline of events.

⁸⁰ Andrew Roy Dyck, *A Commentary on Cicero, De Officiis* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press), 8.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 3-4.

⁸² Cicero, speaking of the *De Officiis*, wrote to his friend Atticus: "Προσφῶν ὧν αὐτὴν Ciceroni filio. Visum est non ἀνοίκειον." (I address, however, the son of Cicero. It did not seem unfitting) (*Att.* 16.11.4); See Dyck, *Commentary on, De Officiis*, 10-1. The choice to address the younger generation was of paramount importance to Cicero, and his choice of addressee also befit Roman notions of familial loyalty.

frustrations and hatreds, but he did so in an attempt to guide to future generations of Romans.

Cicero's criticism of overweening ambition was a major theme in *De Officiis*. In the opening of his work, he wrote, "*Cavenda etiam est gloriae cupiditas, ut supra dixi; eripit enim libertatem, pro qua magnanimis viris debet esse contentio*" (The desire for glory must also be guarded against, as I said above. For it will snatch away liberty, on whose behalf great-souled men ought to struggle.)⁸³ Likewise, *imperia* (military commands) should not always be accepted or retained, but rather "*deponenda nonnumquam*" (sometimes must be turned down.)⁸⁴ This passage contained an implicit criticism of Caesar himself who had not laid down his command at the Senate's request, and thus provoked civil war.⁸⁵ Wanton desires did not allow one the freedom from *perturbationis animi* ("disturbance of the spirit")⁸⁶ In addition to warning against unbridled ambition and desire for power, Cicero argued that citizens had an obligation to serve society according to their abilities. All men ought to shape their lives to their own peculiar gifts, since "*neque enim attinet naturae repugnare nec quicquam sequi, quod assequi non queas*" (it does not avail you to fight against nature nor to pursue something that you cannot pursue).⁸⁷ In Cicero, the concept of civic responsibility also seems irrevocably tied to the concept of *vera gloria*

⁸³ Cic. *Off.* 1.68.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 1.68.

⁸⁵ Dyck, *Commentary on De Officiis*, 197.

⁸⁶ *Off.* 1.69.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 1.110.

(true glory), which required a man to shun personal motivations and actively seek the betterment of the *res publica*.⁸⁸ A citizen had no excuse for not serving the state, out of a desire to avoid the temptations of power.

Although he cited examples from Greek history, many derived from Panaetius's work, Cicero drew most of his examples from Roman history and from his own time. The overly-ambitious men who had plunged the Republic into civil war became warnings. Crassus exemplified the pursuit of wealth taken to its extremes when he denied that *'ullam satis magnam pecuniam esse ei, qui in republica princeps vellet esse, cuius fructibus exercitum alere non posset'* (any wealth was great enough for him who wished to be the first man in the republic, by whose fruits he could not maintain an army).⁸⁹ Likewise, he castigated Sulla for his willingness to seize personal property and to use any means to gain power.⁹⁰ But for Caesar, *"quo omnia iura divina et humana pervertit,"* (who perverted every law, human and divine), he reserved his most withering hatred:

Nam quanto pluris et regi putas, qui exercitu populi Romani populum ipsum Romanum oppressisset civitatemque non modo liberam, sed etiam gentibus imperantem servire sibi coëgisset? Hunc tu quas conscientiae labe in animo censes habuisse, quae vulnera?

For how many more [foes] were there for the king, who oppressed the Roman people itself with an army of the Roman people and led a city, which was just now free and ruling over peoples, to serve him? What waverings of conscience do you think he had in his mind, what wounds?⁹¹

⁸⁸ See Francis A. Sullivan, "Cicero and Gloria," *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 72 (1941): 382-91 for a discussion on Ciceronian conceptions of *gloria*.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.27.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 1.43, 109.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 3.85.

Cicero poured out across the pages of *De Officiis* the fears provoked by years of civil wars. It was by no means an objective look at the last several years of the Roman Republic. Indeed, he portrayed Pompey, who had more than a fair share of power and flaunted the constitution during his consulship without a colleague, very favorably. Cicero counted him among his *amici* (political friends) who had served the Republic during the civil wars.⁹² Between the lessons on morality and duty he imparted to his son, he also spoke out against the ambition that had destroyed the Republic.

In context, the *De Officiis* made a great deal of sense, and reflected Cicero's desire to take control of the political scene—to wrest it from men such as Caesar. By 44, he was seeking to drive an even greater wedge between the two combatants for Julius Caesar's legacy, Octavian and Marc Antony.⁹³ He hoped to support the young Octavian to thwart Antony, and then to discard Octavian if he did not allow himself to be controlled by Cicero and his followers.⁹⁴ As Decimus Brutus recalled in a letter to Cicero, the latter had said, '*laudandum adolescentum, ornandum, tollendum*' (The young man must be praised, honored, and then lifted up—and off).⁹⁵ In his *Phillipics* against Antony, Cicero had inspired the latter's

⁹² *Ibid.*, 2.2.

⁹³ Syme, *Roman Revolution*, 142-3.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 143.

⁹⁵ The play on words, which I have attempted to retain in my English translation, in this phrase hinges on *tollendum*, from the verb *tollere*, which can either mean to honor or raise up or to destroy.

wrath, and Octavian chose to ally himself to Antony rather than Cicero.⁹⁶ After going to Rome to gather funds to flee to Macedonia, Cicero stopped at his villa at Formiae, where Antony's forces found and killed him. His severed hands were displayed in the Forum Romanum.⁹⁷ Such was his end.

Despite Cicero's biases and despite his failure to save the Roman Republic, his diagnosis of the problem was not incorrect. The ambition and power of a handful of very powerful men posed a tremendous danger to the stability of the commonwealth. This is not to deny bias in Cicero's own writings. His own feelings towards Caesar clearly colored the portrait he presented in *De Officiis*. The tradition of Julius Caesar as demon lived on in the *Pharsalia* of Lucan, but even later historians such as Suetonius had to concede that Caesar showed clemency to his enemies and did great things for Rome.⁹⁸ The image of *Caesar Rex*, Caesar the King, nevertheless held great sway over later generations. For John Adams, who was a devotee of Cicero and absorbed this image into his own thought, whether men of great ambition would attempt to seize power in a republic was not a question of "if" so much as "when."

⁹⁶ David Stockton, *Cicero: A Political Biography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 328-31.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 331-2.

⁹⁸ As Suetonius put it, Caesar was "*in ulciscendo natura lenissimus*" (most lenient by nature in taking vengeance) (*Caes.* 74.1).

Chapter III

The lessons of the Roman Republic and the way the ambitious men who wielded military power destroyed it left an obvious impression on John Adams. He had grown up with Cicero's warnings against ambitious men, and he most assuredly saw men in the government of the United States who fit the mold. This influence was most apparent during his term as president. In 1797, the United States faced growing hostility from the French government, and war seemed imminent. Adams, already inclined to trust to a strengthened navy, saw no reason to expand the army. But as preparations for war and negotiations with France continued, he became aware of a threat to the American Republic, Alexander Hamilton, whom he saw as a striving, ambitious man like the Caesars and Sullas of the Roman world. This fear compelled Adams to defuse tensions with France and wreck the plans of Hamilton and the High Federalists to use the so-called "New Army" to subvert the republic.

The "Quasi-War" with France broke on Adams's administration on 13 March 1797. The French government, the Directory, had pronounced what amounted to a declaration of war on American shipping, and the French navy had seized several American vessels in the Caribbean.⁹⁹ The crisis had been brewing for some time as a result of France's decision in 1796 to seize neutral shipping carrying contraband to British ports, just as Britain was doing to neutrals carrying

⁹⁹ *Feeling, Adams: A Life*, 342.

⁹⁹ David McCullough, *John Adams* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004), 477.

contraband to French ports.¹⁰⁰ This heightening of tensions had begun during the final years of George Washington's presidency, and he had dispatched Charles Cotesworth Pinckney to replace James Monroe as the United States's representative in Paris.¹⁰¹ The same courier who brought tidings of the Directory's decree declaring its intention to subject American shipping to seizure also carried news that the Directory had refused to receive Pinckney and had expelled him from the country.¹⁰² Faced with this crisis, Adams, the new president, chose to wait, explore his options, and call for a special session of Congress two months later, beginning on 15 May.¹⁰³ On the second day of the session, he explained his policy in an address to the assembled legislators:

It is my desire, and in this I presume that I concur with you, and with your constituents, to preserve peace and friendship with all nations and believing that neither the honor nor the interest of the United States absolutely forbid the repetition of advances for securing these desirable objects with France, I shall institute a fresh attempt at negotiation, and shall not fail to promote and accelerate an accommodation, on terms compatible with the rights, duties, interests, and honor of the nation.¹⁰⁴

He also included, however, strong denunciations of French depredations on American shipping in the Caribbean and called for an expansion of American

¹⁰⁰ John Ferling, *John Adams: A Life* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992), 339.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 339.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 342; Stephen G. Kurtz, *The Presidency of John Adams: The Collapse of Federalism, 1795-1800* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1957), 230.

¹⁰³ Ferling, *Adams: A Life*, 342.

¹⁰⁴ *Annals of Congress*, 5th Cong., 1st sess. (Washington, D.C.: Gales and Seaton, 1834-1856), 7:56; Hereafter, *Annals*.

naval forces.¹⁰⁵

Federalists delighted in the speech and Republicans deplored it.

Washington commented that Adams had "placed matters upon their true ground."¹⁰⁶ In contrast, the Republican press, particularly Benjamin Bache's *Aurora*, called the President a tool of British interests and "a man divested of his senses."¹⁰⁷ Adams's plan to offer a fresh olive branch to France almost immediately encountered opposition from his cabinet. He had chosen to retain the cabinet of his predecessor, and it had proven more loyal to Alexander Hamilton, the *de facto* leader of the High Federalists, than to Adams.¹⁰⁸ The members originally supported the peace effort, but when Adams named John Marshall, Elbridge Gerry, and Pinckney as a new delegation to France, the cabinet balked.¹⁰⁹ To conciliate the cabinet which objected to Gerry, who was a Republican, Adams named Francis Dana, who had served as ambassador to Russia, to replace Gerry.¹¹⁰ But when Dana declined, Adams insisted on the appointment of Gerry, an old friend from the revolutionary generation.¹¹¹ Adams had written of him earlier in the year, "Gerry is Steady, while so many prove as

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 7:57.

¹⁰⁶ McCullough, *Adams*, 485.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 485.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 471-2.

¹⁰⁹ Ferling, *Adams: A Life*, 344-5.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 345.

¹¹¹ McCullough, *Adams*, 486-7.

Slippery as Eels."¹¹²

The emissaries received a welcome in France that badly damaged prospects for peace. The lackeys of Minister Talleryand—Jean Conrad Huttinger, Pierre Belamy, and Lucient Hauteval—demanded a bribe of \$250,000 for Talleryand and a "loan" of \$10,000,000 for the French Republic.¹¹³ Word of the demand reached Adams on 4 March 1798, and on the 19 March, he addressed Congress and called for "such measures as the ample resources of our country afford" to increase military preparedness.¹¹⁴ Adams attempted to withhold the full details of the affair from Congress, but the legislators demanded full disclosure. Adams used the initials W, X, Y, and Z to identify the French commissioners, and the incident became the "XYZ Affair."¹¹⁵ Abigail Adams, writing of her husband's emotional state at the time, summarized the problems facing the President:

I am afraid the President will be overwhelmed. Business thickens upon him. Officering all the frigates, contemplating what can be done at this period, *knowing what he thinks ought to be done*, yet not certain whether the people are sufficiently determined to second the Government in a situation very painful as well as responsible. . . .¹¹⁶

Adams clearly faced a very difficult problem early in his administration.

¹¹² John Adams to Abigail Adams, 11 January 1797, in *Adams Electronic Archive: An Electronic Archive* [manuscript collection online] (Massachusetts Historical Society); available at <http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/>. Hereafter *AEA*.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 495.

¹¹⁴ *Annals*, 5th Cong., 2nd sess., 7:532-4.

¹¹⁵ Ferling, *Adams: A Life*, 354.

¹¹⁶ Abigail Adams to Mary Cranch, 13 March 1798, in *New Letters of Abigail Adams*, ed. Stewart Mitchell (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1947), 144.

Over the next several months, Congress allocated money for twelve new frigates, naval fortifications, and a Department of the Navy.¹¹⁷ It also provided for a "provisional army" of 10,000 men. The size troubled Adams, even though it was a considerably smaller figure than the 25,000 originally proposed.¹¹⁸ This legislation, proposed by Federalists in Congress, closely mirrored the proposal Secretary of War James McHenry had sent to Adams before the XYZ Affair. McHenry, however, had not composed the proposal, but rather had asked Alexander Hamilton to draft it.¹¹⁹ The legislation ran counter to Adams's own instincts. He preferred a strong navy, having said in an address to the Boston Maritime Society that "[w]ooden walls have been my favorite system of warfare and defense for three and twenty years."¹²⁰

Still, Adams seemed swept up in war preparations and his unaccustomed popularity.¹²¹ War fever spurred him to act uncharacteristically. In a reply to a resolution from the student body of Princeton College, Adams stated, "To me

¹¹⁷ McCullough, *Adams*, 499

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 499

¹¹⁹ Ferling, *Adams: A Life*, 354.

¹²⁰ McCullough, *Adams*, 509; This phrasing in itself is an interesting example of classical phrasing finding its way into Adams's rhetoric. The phrase "wooden walls" is strikingly similar to the advice given by the Delphic Oracle to the Athenians when they sought the gods' will prior to the Persian invasion of the 480s B.C.: "τείχος Τριτογενεῖ ξύλινον διδοῖ εὐρύσπα Ζεὺς μῦνον ἀπόρρητον τελέθειν, τὸ σὲ τέκνα τ' ὀνήσει" (Far-seeing Zeus gives to the Triton-born a wooden wall, alone to be unravaged, which will be an aid to you and your children) (Hd. *Hist.* 7.141.3). According to Herodotus, the wall given to the "Triton-born" (an epithet of Athena, which here stands for the city of Athens itself) was correctly interpreted by the general Themistocles as a reference to the Athenian navy.

¹²¹ Joseph Ellis calls Adams's style "enlightened perversity." The penchant for playing devil's advocate and becoming a self-made martyr appeared early in his career, when he defended the British troops implicated in the Boston massacre. See Joseph Ellis, *Founding Brothers: The Revolutionary Generation* (New York: Vintage Books, 2002), 195.

there appears no means of averting the storm, and in my opinion we must all be ready to dedicate ourselves to fatigue and dangers."¹²² And to the New Jersey Society of the Cincinnati, he declared, "*if the principal barrier to French tyranny [i.e. the European coalition against France] should be broken down, America must prepare for a severer trial than she has ever experienced.*"¹²³ In this mood Adams placed his signature on the Nationalization Act and the Alien and Sedition Acts. These acts, the first of which passed Congress on 18 June, were clearly partisan Federalist legislation.¹²⁴ The Naturalization Act increased the waiting period for American citizenship from five to fourteen years, and the Alien Friends Act and the Alien Enemies Act allowed the President wide discretion in deporting foreign nationals from the United States.¹²⁵ Most odious of all, the Sedition Act provided for fines and incarceration of those who made false or scandalous statements about Federal officials. Even Hamilton questioned the judiciousness of the acts.¹²⁶ The course of events, however, brought Adams back to his original determination to avoid war when he became aware of Hamilton's designs to take control of the provisional army.

Hamilton's aims only became clear to Adams when he faced the decision of whom to appoint as the head of the provisional army. George Washington,

¹²² Kurtz, *Presidency*, 300.

¹²³ John Adams to New Jersey Society of the Cincinnati, *Porcupine's Gazette* (Philadelphia), 11 July 1798.

¹²⁴ Ferling, *Adams: A Life*, 365-6.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 365-6.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 365-6.

though an old man and in retirement, commanded a prestige that few if any could match, and he was the logical choice for the post. On 2 July, Adams nominated Washington as commander-in-chief of the provisional army and wrote to the former president to inform him. Congress actually ratified the appointment before Washington could reply. He accepted the command in case of "an *actual* Invasion" and much more tellingly, given what was to come, specified:

But as the mode of carrying on the War against the Foe that threatens, must differ widely from that practiced in the contest for Independence, it will not be an easy matter, I conceive, to find among the *old set* of Generals, men of sufficient activity, energy & health, and of sound politics, to train troops to the *quick step*, long Marches, and severe conflicts they may have to encounter; and therefore recourse must be had (for the greater part at least) to the well known, most experienced, best proved, intelligent Officers of the late Army; without respect to Grade.¹²⁷

When Adams sent Washington a list of candidates from which he could choose his general officers, including his second-in-command, the inspector general, he received a response from Washington that made it evident precisely what "best proved, intelligent Officers of the late Army" meant. Not only did Washington demand that he be allowed free rein in choosing his subordinates, but the list he sent included three names for the rank of Major General. All were Federalists, and at the top of the list and poised to receive the post of inspector general, was Alexander Hamilton.¹²⁸

¹²⁷ George Washington to John Adams, 4 July 1798, in *The Papers of George Washington: Retirement Series*, Dorothy Twohig, ed. (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1998), 369-70.

¹²⁸ Ferling, *Adams: A Life*, 360.

The enmity between Adams and Hamilton was long-standing. The president had no qualms about expressing his dislike of Hamilton, whom he called a "bastard brat of a Scotch Pedlar," an offensive description, if one that was broadly true.¹²⁹ Hamilton had been born on the Caribbean island of Nevis to his mother Rachel Faucette and her husband Johann Michael Lavien.¹³⁰ The birth, however, came after she had abandoned Lavier around 1750, thus making Hamilton an illegitimate child.¹³¹

After his family moved to St. Croix, Hamilton wrote a letter describing the events of a tremendous hurricane that had battered the island for a local gazette, and so impressed the prominent men of the community that they raised a fund for him to be sent to the United States to be educated.¹³² Hamilton applied himself diligently in his studies, first at a preparatory school in Elizabethtown, New Jersey, and then at King's College, where he received schooling in the Classics.¹³³ The choice to attend King's College also placed Hamilton into a community known for Tory thought.¹³⁴ Hamilton went on to a remarkable career, serving as a colonel in the Revolutionary War, a co-author of the *Federalist Papers*, President Washington's Secretary of the Treasury, and a prominent member of the Federalist party. He also became a lightning rod for Republicans who feared

¹²⁹ Ellis, *Founding Brothers*, 22.

¹³⁰ Ron Chernov, *Alexander Hamilton* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004), 10-1.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 36-7.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 42-9.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 49.

political despotism.¹³⁵ In a letter to Abigail in 1797, Adams described Hamilton as "a proud Spirited, conceited, aspiring Mortal always pretending to Morality, with as debauched Morals as old [Benjamin] Franklin who is more his Model than any one I know."¹³⁶ Adams's loathing for Hamilton went far beyond mere distaste and took on dimensions shaped by the classical experience.

In 1811, Thomas Jefferson wrote a letter to Benjamin Rush in which he described an evening during George Washington's presidency when he, John Adams, and Alexander Hamilton entered into an after dinner discussion of politics. After Hamilton and Adams had debated the virtues of the British constitution—with Hamilton arguing for and Adams against—the conversation turned to a discussion of the portraits of Bacon, Newton, and Locke hanging on the wall. Jefferson called them his "trinity of the three greatest men." In his letter to Rush, Jefferson recalled Hamilton's response: "He paused for some time: 'the greatest man,' said he, 'that ever lived, was Julius Caesar.'"¹³⁷ Of course, precisely what Hamilton meant by this is open to debate. As Hamilton's biographer Richard Brookhiser notes, this comment marked the only recorded time that Hamilton

¹³⁵ Ibid., 3. Hamilton's biography does not fit the scope of this paper, but this author does strongly suggest Ron Chernov's work here referenced.

¹³⁶ John Adams to Abigail Adams, 9 January 1797, in *AEA*.

¹³⁷ Thomas Jefferson to Benjamin Rush, 16 January 1811, in *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, eds. Andrew A Lipscomb and Albert E. Bergh, 20 vols. (Washington, D.C.: Thomas Jefferson Memorial Association, 1905), 13:3-4.

praised Caesar, and Hamilton himself tried to pin the same label of Caesar on Aaron Burr. In all likelihood, Hamilton merely meant to irritate Jefferson.¹³⁸

Still, the name resonated even for men not steeped in classical antiquity, so the historian must ask what impact such an assertion would have had upon its audience, even if it were simply intended to irk Jefferson. Adams grew up immersed in the Classics, enamored of Cicero, and as can easily be seen in his political writings, viewed the present through the experience of antiquity. Reading Cicero's denunciations of Caesar and Adams's own examinations of Roman history helped to create the president's frame of reference. It is not difficult to hear echoes of Cicero's denunciations in his vituperations against Hamilton. The improper "*cupiditas gloriae*" (desire for glory) Cicero found in Caesar in his *De Officiis* (On Duties) paralleled the "aspiring" nature Adams saw in Hamilton.¹³⁹ The rhetoric of an opponent who was "the most restless, impatient, artful, indefatigable and unprincipled Intriguer in the United States" echoed the Ciceronian tendency to take an opponent's virtues and make them into vices.¹⁴⁰ While berating Sergius Catilina (Catiline) for planning treachery against the Roman state, Cicero mocked "*tuam illam praeclarum patientiam famis, frigoris, inopiae rerum omnium*" (that famous capacity of yours for bearing

¹³⁸ Richard Brookhiser, *Alexander Hamilton, American* (New York: Free Press, 1999), 191-2.

¹³⁹ Cic. *Off.* 1.68.

¹⁴⁰ Ferling, *Adams: A Life*, 361.

hunger, cold, and an utter lack of all necessities).¹⁴¹ In much the same way, Adams called Hamilton "indefatigable." Like the military dynasts that Cicero derided, in Adams's eyes the "bastard brat" took the virtues of a servant of the state and corrupted them into the vices of a Caesar.

The president's assessment of Hamilton's scheming seen through the lens of Caesar's own schemes to gain power was not far off the mark, either. It became increasingly evident that Hamilton had manipulated both Washington and the members of Adams's own cabinet to try to secure his position as Inspector General. He himself wrote to Washington on 8 July to campaign for the position and told the general, "The President has no *relative* ideas, and his prepossessions on military subjects in reference to such a point are of the wrong sort."¹⁴² Secretary of State Timothy Pickering, and possibly Secretary McHenry, also lobbied Washington on Hamilton's behalf.¹⁴³ The would-be Caesar had remarkable plans for the army of which, with Washington being too old to take an active role in the field, he would be virtual commander. Hamilton drafted plans to march into Virginia to destroy his Republican foes and then drive into Mexico and South America to push out the French and Spanish.¹⁴⁴ In a letter to McHenry, Hamilton outlined this plan:

¹⁴¹ Cic. *Cat.* 1.26.

¹⁴² Alexander Hamilton to George Washington, 8 July 1798, in *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, ed. Harold C. Syrett, 27 vols. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974), 21:535; Hereafter, *PAH*.

¹⁴³ McCullough, *Adams*, 510.

¹⁴⁴ Ellis, *Founding Brothers*, 194.

It is desireable to complete and prepare the land force which has been provided for by law. Besides eventual security against invasion, we ought certainly to look to the possession of the Floridas and Louisiana—and we ought to squint at South America.¹⁴⁵

"To squint at South America" referred to the plans of Francisco Miranda, currently on the payroll of the British, to liberate Spain's empire in Central and South America. Hamilton apparently planned on joining his forces with Miranda's.¹⁴⁶ These plans, though grandiose, posed an incredible threat to the republic. A move against the Republicans that used military force to quell political opposition would have been particularly dangerous to the political health of the nation.

Adams faced a particularly unpalatable dilemma. He suspected Hamilton's motives and feared the threat to the stability of the state should Hamilton reach a position of command. Unfortunately, to oppose Hamilton in this situation was to oppose Washington and to pit Adams's own reputation against that of Washington, a man who had tremendous political influence, even in retirement. Adams tried making a single substitution to the list of candidates proposed by Washington, but the Hamiltonians in Congress defeated even that proposal.¹⁴⁷ To make matters worse, Adams also came under pressure from New England Federalists, particularly Henry Knox, a prominent veteran of the Revolutionary War and Washington's first Secretary of War, regarding the

¹⁴⁵ Alexander Hamilton to James McHenry, 27 June 1799, *PAH*, 23:227.

¹⁴⁶ Kurtz, *Presidency*, 317-8.

¹⁴⁷ Ferling, *Adams: A Life*, 361.

nominations for command. As Knox wrote to Washington on July 29, "New England, which must furnish the Majority of the Army if one shall be raised, will be without a Major General."¹⁴⁸ This dispute gave Adams an opportunity to satisfy New England's complaints and to muzzle Hamilton. He announced in August 1798 that officers' ranks would depend on the date of their commission in the Continental Army, a ruling that would make Knox the senior commander and Hamilton the most junior general officer.¹⁴⁹ Washington responded with a letter to Secretary of State Pickering, reminding Adams that he was unwilling to command unless he could choose his own subordinates.¹⁵⁰ On the advice of Secretary of the Treasury Oliver Wolcott, with Secretary Pickering and Secretary of the Navy Benjamin Stoddert concurring, Adams agreed to Washington's demand.¹⁵¹

The arrangement allowed Adams to disavow responsibility for New England being denied an appointment to the high command of the Provisional Army, but it did nothing to stop Hamilton from taking control of the army and using it for his own ends. The only way to prevent his coup was to prevent war with France, and events in Europe had not lent themselves to that objective. On 12 June 1798, Adams had received a dispatch dated 12 April that Pinckney and

¹⁴⁸ Henry Knox to George Washington, 29 July 1798, in *The Writings of George Washington*, ed. John C. Fitzpatrick (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1931-44), 36:347-9, note 49; Hereafter, *GW*.

¹⁴⁹ Ferling, *Adams: A Life*, 362.

¹⁵⁰ George Washington to Timothy Pickering, 16 September 1798, in *GW*, 36:447.

¹⁵¹ Ferling, *Adams: A Life*, 362-3.

Marshall had left Paris in the wake of the XYZ Affair, but that the French were willing to treat with Elbridge Gerry alone.¹⁵² Gerry's decision to remain and negotiate as a private citizen brought tremendous public criticism down upon him.

Abigail wrote to a friend, Mary Cranch:

You may easily suppose how distressed the President is at this conduct, and the more so, because he thought Gerry would certainly not go wrong, and he *acted* his own judgment, *against his counsellors*, "who have been truer prophets than they wish themselves." Gerry means the Good of his Country, he means the Peace of it, but he should consider, it must not be purchased by national disgrace and dishonour.¹⁵³

Gerry's decision to stay, however, provided the means for Adams to thwart

Hamilton's plans.

In October, Gerry returned to the United States and visited Adams in Quincy, Massachusetts, with a simple, direct, and exceedingly welcome message: The French sought peace. Adams had heard similar news from other sources. Dr. George Logan, a Quaker who had gone to Paris in 1798 with letters of introduction from Thomas Jefferson and other prominent Republicans, met with Adams and stated that any envoy the President sent would be received. Likewise, William Vans Murray, the American representative at the Hague, had struck up a friendship with Louis André Pichon, the French legate. Based on their conversations, Murray became convinced that France feared driving the United States into league with Britain. And finally, in a series of communiqués, the last

¹⁵² McCullough, *Adams*, 502-3.

¹⁵³ Abigail Adams to Mary Cranch, 13 June 1798 in *New Letters*, 192.

of which arrived in May 1799, French Minister Talleyrand made it clear that his country would receive American envoys.¹⁵⁴

This news, along with a story in the *Aurora* which revealed that the British were responsible for more attacks on American shipping than the French, helped sway public opinion towards peace. Napoleon's coup d'état against the Directory gave him pause, but Adams named Murray, and under pressure from his cabinet added William Davie, to the mission to France. When they sailed on 15 November 1799, High Federalist prospects for the New Army seemed dim.¹⁵⁵

On 3 December, with the Quasi-War at last resolved, Adams addressed the Congress. Pointing to the envoys he had dispatched to conclude a treaty with the French government, he stressed "the flattering prospects of abundance" now presented to the nation.¹⁵⁶ The return of peace could not have come soon enough. In 1798, the Alien and Sedition Acts had prompted the passage of the Kentucky and Virginia Resolutions which asserted the rights of the states to oppose federal oppression, and rumors of special troops being armed in the South to resist Federalist oppression had begun to circulate.¹⁵⁷ The taxes Congress had levied to pay for the enormous military campaign were tremendously unpopular. In March 1799, a revolt against the new taxes led by a militia officer named John Fries

¹⁵⁴ McCullough, *Adams*, 511, 527-8; Ferling, *Adams: A Life*, 374-5.

¹⁵⁵ Ferling, *Adams: A Life*, 375, 377; 379-80; McCullough, *Adams*, 531.

¹⁵⁶ *American State Papers: Foreign Affairs* (Washington, D.C.: Gales and Seaton, 1832-1861), 1:49-50.

¹⁵⁷ John R. Howe, Jr., *The Changing Political Thought of John Adams* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), 198.

broke out in Pennsylvania.¹⁵⁸ The return of peace in 1800 allowed the country to move past such dangerous ruptures.¹⁵⁹

As for John Adams, the peace allowed him to prevent Hamilton from gaining the power that he so desired. The influence of the Classics had given Adams a distinct sensitivity to the dangers posed by ambitious men to republican government. Looking back on the events of 1797-1799 with the knowledge that the American republic did not fall, it is difficult to perceive the dangers that Adams felt. At the same time, the writings of Alexander Hamilton confirm that he did indeed harbor such grandiose plans. Adams cast Hamilton in the role of Caesar, and sought—quite successfully—to prevent Caesar from again crossing the Rubicon.

¹⁵⁸ Kurtz, *Presidency*, 357-8, 360.

¹⁵⁹ McCullough, *Adams*, 552.

Conclusion

Adams succeeded in his goal. Hamilton never gained command of an army in the field. The president did so, however, to the detriment of his political career. He forfeited the enormous popularity a successful war-time president could gain. He had managed to reach a settlement with France, but that achievement only added fuel to the fire of his opponents who labeled him an Anglophile.¹⁶⁰ Worse still, Hamilton alienated the High Federalists from Adams and schemed to make Charles Cotesworth Pinckney president.¹⁶¹ In an October letter published in New York, Hamilton excoriated the president as unfit for his duties.¹⁶² Adams lost New York and the presidential election of 1800.¹⁶³

The historian cannot know for certain all of Adams's motivations for conducting the Quasi-War with France, but the specter of an American Republic smashed as easily as the Roman one had been, by a Hamilton rather than a Caesar, undoubtedly colored his actions. The Classics had shaped Adams's thought since he was child and encouraged him to view the present in terms of the ancient past. He saw the parallel between the Roman state and the American one, but he chose, by opposing Hamilton, to avoid that parallel at all costs. And the cost was great for Adams. It ended his career, but his sacrifice helped preserve the life of his country.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 544.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 545.

¹⁶² Ibid., 549-50.

¹⁶³ Ibid., 556.

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¹ Alex. Wardman, *Plutarch's Lives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), 37-8.

² For an examination of Classical influences on Jefferson, see Benjamin Rumley, "The Power of a Lifelong Education: Classical Influences on Thomas Jefferson's Decision for War with the Barbary Pirates" (Honors Thesis, Washington and Lee University, 2004).