

Fame, Celebrity, and the Legacy of John Adams

Trevor Parry-Giles

This essay examines the attempts by historian David McCullough in legislative hearings, media interviews, and with his famous biography of John Adams to rescue the second president's legacy. Specifically, the essay contends that McCullough's discourse championing Adams promotes this founder's celebrity rather than his meritorious fame, and in so doing violates the very understandings of fame and renown so central to Adams's conceptions of political motivation. Ultimately, the essay reads McCullough's attempts to memorialize Adams against Adams's theories of fame and political psychology, revealing what Adams's approach to political motivation says about the state of contemporary political rhetoric.

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Perhaps it is because of the jarring events of September 11, 2001, or perhaps it is an outgrowth of the Clinton scandals and the Bush prevarications, but for whatever reason, the United States is, once again, in a period of Founders nostalgia. New biographies of the likes of Alexander Hamilton, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin appear regularly on the bestseller lists. These treatments are profiled on the cover of national news magazines. Their authors are featured on cable television and on talk radio. Documentaries and fictional treatments of the lives of the Founders are found on cable television, in theaters, and on DVDs in video stores across the country. The Founders are everywhere.

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An outgrowth of our collective nostalgia for the Founders (as well as other important historical figures) is the ongoing attempt to memorialize and commemorate their legacies. A stroll through Philadelphia, for instance, offers numerous commemorations of Benjamin Franklin. And alongside the colossus of Abraham Lincoln in the nation's capital are the two monuments to the most preeminent of the Founders, George Washington and Thomas Jefferson. Indeed, Washington, DC's gift shops and souvenir stands are a lingering testimony to the power of these Founders' legacies for the nation's collective imagination.

In his assessment of George Washington's legacy, historian Forrest McDonald writes that our first president "differed from ordinary mortals by picking a progression of characters during his lifetime, each nobler and grander than the last, and by playing each so well that he ultimately transformed himself into a man of extrahuman virtue" (217).¹ Washington occupies a revered place in US political life and culture; he remains first in the hearts of his country. Similarly, even with continued controversy and turmoil regarding historical fact and the lingering sting of slavery, Thomas Jefferson is central to the "political philosophy and civic identity" of the United States (Vivian, "Jefferson's Other" 285).

In 2001, a concerted effort began to expand this vision of the nation's founding by adding John Adams. This attempt is revealing for the tensions that emerge between a vision of fame and distinction rooted in merit and public virtue and the power of celebrity as guided by visibility and affectivity. Were John Adams alive today, he might be distressed to see his historical legacy and our collective memory of him defined less by the merit of his actions and decisions and more by affective rhetorics of pity, oversight, and love—a memory of celebrity more than a memory of substance and accomplishment. Yet, in some measure because of the renewal of his celebrity, House Resolution 1668 became Public Law 107-62 on November 5, 2001, to "authorize the Adams Memorial Foundation to establish a commemorative work on Federal land in the District of Columbia and its environs to honor former President John Adams and his legacy."

Though not much has happened in the effort to construct the Adams Memorial, the endeavor to secure passage of the legislation, along with the general resurrection of Adams's memory, is a fascinating episode in the development of collective memory in a contemporary mediated environment. This essay pays particular attention to the role and rhetoric of historian David McCullough in the effort to memorialize John Adams. Both in the legislative process to achieve passage of the Adams memorial and through his famous, Pulitzer Prize-winning biography of Adams, McCullough actively sought the rescue of the second president's legacy and to secure his place among the memorials of the nation's capital and in the nation's collective memory.

Of course, David McCullough is not the only, nor the first, author to pen a praiseworthy biography of a historical figure. McCullough is, in fact, all too typical of an ongoing trend in history and biography where some historians translate their explorations for popular audiences and work comfortably within the contemporary mass media. Television networks forge contracts with presidential historians like Michael Beschloss, Douglas Brinkley, and Doris Kearns Goodwin that allow them to peddle their books via the networks' news programs while also giving the networks

ready access to commentary about all matters historical and biographical about our chief executives. McCullough works comfortably in this context, appearing on many media outlets when he writes a new book and functioning as a celebrity in his own right. Even more than his contemporaries, and perhaps because of his background as an English major and his compelling narratives, McCullough's biographies and histories are frequently the genesis of media treatments of their subjects, with HBO offering a film rendition of his biography of Harry S. Truman and preparing a miniseries for broadcast in 2008 of his biography of John Adams.

While David McCullough exemplifies a trend in the contemporary mass-mediated translation of history and biography, his role in the rescue of John Adams's historical legacy is also specific and unique. McCullough diligently sought to take his biography into the public realm to influence collective memory and public policy. As Congress discussed the propriety of yet another memorial in the nation's capital, McCullough testified and influenced the debate, borrowing extensively from his personal celebrity and expertise in the process. McCullough's historical intervention in public debates about John Adams is also compelling for its use of particular discourses, or the rhetorical grammars he employed in the formation of Adams's collective memory. Specifically, I argue that McCullough's discourse championing Adams promoted this founder's celebrity rather than his meritorious fame, and in so doing violated the very understandings of fame and renown so central to Adams's conceptions of political motivation.

It is this rhetorical interplay between the historian and his subject that makes McCullough's discussions of John Adams so interesting as an instantiation of collective memory. Paying particular attention to how rhetorical actors like David McCullough participate in the formation of collective memory using the rhetorical techniques and topics of contemporary political discourse, especially in comparison to the Revolutionary-era political theories of John Adams on fame, celebrity and renown, provides a fascinating glimpse into the evolution of political and memory rhetorics in a contemporary mass-mediated environment.²

As a drafter of the Declaration of Independence, a diplomat, a vice president, and as president, Adams's reputation, his legacy, often are eclipsed by his contemporaries, including Washington, Franklin, Jefferson. But as a political philosopher, John Adams may have been the most prescient of the entire group. While he stands out in his other roles, Adams was a "political philosopher of authentic power and range," notes Joseph Dorfman (227).³ His *Defence of the Constitution*, his authorship of the Massachusetts state constitution, his insights into political philosophy and psychology all justify Adams's reputation as one of the "principal figures of the American founding," who Bruce Miroff concludes can "serve as a guide to the lineaments of an American leadership grounded in genuinely political passions and commitments" (52). Central to Adams's political philosophy, to his explanations about American political leadership, was his belief that an overriding political motivation was the quest for fame. Ultimately, I read McCullough's attempts to memorialize Adams against Adams's own theories of fame and political psychology, revealing what Adams's approach to political motivation says about the state of

contemporary political rhetoric and our collective tendencies to memorialize and commemorate the past in nostalgic, celebrityized ways.

Collective Memory and the Grammars of Celebrity Culture

Collective memory, as defined by Barbie Zelizer, “refers to the recollections that are instantiated beyond the individual by and for the collective” (214). Distinguished from the academic study of history, concerned as it is with “legitimacy based on research norms,” collective memory instead “is an overtly political and emotionally invested phenomenon,” notes Carole Blair (53). It is, moreover, “partial and material in its communication and demarcation of the past” (Parry-Giles and Parry-Giles 418). Rhetors engaged in the process of collective memory, in its formation and communication to a larger public, are rhetorical actors making significant rhetorical choices. They cannot possibly account for the entirety of the past in their version of that past. Instead, they must select and omit, emphasize and elide in their renditions of memory. To this extent, the process of forming and articulating collective memory is a supremely political act, an act that has meaningful ideological power. Not surprisingly, Stephen Browne reveals that “public memory gets performed within contexts of power and aspirations so routinely that its political character cannot be missed” (466)⁴ Browne’s insight emphasizes the “contexts of power and aspirations” in which collective memory occurs. Centrally important in this context is the struggle to “claim an authoritative voice in collectively remembering” the past (Zelizer 225). While everyone, to some extent, may participate in the production of memory, the production of collective memory does not occur equally. As Zelizer suggests, “some people actively construct memories, while others perform activities that are crucial to their transmission, retention, or contestation” (230). These struggles can evolve into what Eviatar Zerubavel calls “mnemonic battles” that remind us that “our recollections of the past are by no means objective, as we clearly do not all remember it the same way” (2).

In the case of the Founders, there is an ongoing and active attempt to construct and transmit their collective memory, from the shops of the nation’s capital to the biographies and histories at the nation’s bookstores. Voices like those of H. W. Brands, Ron Chernow, Walter Isaacson, and David McCullough are among the most authoritative in the performance of this collective memory—they prevail in the struggle to establish authority in this particular realm of collective remembrance.

Historically reviving the legacy and memory of John Adams, though, was a difficult task given his relative obscurity to most Americans. As a one-term president sandwiched between the glories of Washington and Jefferson, as the president who signed the dreaded Alien and Sedition Acts, as the leader who seemed pre-occupied with titles and questions of nobility (Dorfman; Hutson 30–39), as the revolutionary figure lampooned as a loud-mouthed, arrogant snob, John Adams suffered from a lackluster historical reputation. That would change, in some measure, with the publication of David McCullough’s 2001 biography, *John Adams*. A national bestseller

and Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *John Adams* was advertised as a “powerful, epic biography” and “history on a grand scale.”

McCullough’s biography of Adams reveals the central importance of the choices and grammars invoked by those rhetors with the power and authority to articulate collective memory for public audiences. Our collective memories, Bradford Vivian reminds us, are nomadic such that “we may remember the same events over and over again, but we remember them according to fluctuating conditions, in different times and places, in response to changing needs and desires” (“A Timeless Now” 190). Similarly, different times and contexts bring forth different rhetorical grammars for the construction of collective memory. In this way, just as collective memories themselves are nomadic, so too are the frameworks, the rhetorical domains and techniques that express and communicate them. These grammars form a part of what Zerubavel calls mnemonic socialization, where “remembering is also governed by unmistakably social *norms of remembrance*” that indicate what and how the past should be recalled and used (5, emphasis in original).

Read critically, McCullough’s vision of Adams emerges as revisionist biography bordering on hagiography. McCullough’s regard for Adams is apparent throughout the work, from his approbation of Adams’s determination during his time as a diplomat in Europe to his appreciation for Adams’s presidential efforts to preserve peace with France. For instance, McCullough reports at length on a loan from Holland, secured by Adams for the young United States in 1782. An “all-important beginning,” this loan represented “money desperately needed at home and a foundation for American credit in Europe.” Moreover, with this action, Adams “had indeed succeeded brilliantly, as others and history would attest” (271–72). Similarly, in recounting Adams’s role as president, securing peace with France was deemed the “proudest” achievement of his presidency. In what must surely count as pure adulation, McCullough writes of the Adams presidency:

Subjected to some of the most malicious attacks ever endured by a president, beset by personal disloyalty and political betrayal, suffering the loss of his mother, the near death of his wife, the death of a son, tormented by physical ailments, he had more than weathered the storm. His bedrock integrity, his spirit of independence, his devotion to country, his marriage, his humor, and a great underlying love of life were all still very much intact (567).

Tellingly, McCullough is quick to explain away the most pernicious legacy of the Adams administration, the Alien and Sedition Acts. Most of Adams’s other biographers are quite circumspect in their assessment of his role in the passage and enforcement of these acts. Bruce Miroff, for example, argues that Adams “was culpable both in creating the bellicose political climate that made the acts possible and in authorizing prosecutions under their aegis” (78). “Historians have disagreed,” writes Ralph Adams Brown, “about John Adams’s personal attitude toward the legislation. . . and there seems no certainty of his position” (124). And John Patrick Diggins, also reflecting on the historical uncertainty about Adams’s role in the Alien and Sedition Acts, identifies the Acts as “one moment of deep regret, an action that might have been avoided, one that backfired and played into the hands of the opposition” (110).

McCullough expresses little of the ambivalence and uncertainty of his fellow historians in his revision of Adams's role in the enactment and enforcement of the Alien and Sedition Acts. Noting that Adams "had not asked for or encouraged" the Acts' passage, McCullough condemns "their passage and his signature on them" as "the most reprehensible acts of his presidency." Yet in the very next sentence, McCullough gives Adams an escape—"Still, the infamous Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798 must be seen in the context of the time, and the context was tumult and fear." McCullough explicitly accepts Adams's view that the Acts were "war measures" and he concludes that "the United States was at war—declared or not—and there were in fact numbers of enemy agents operating in the country." Arguing, along with Adams that the Acts improved "on the existing common law in that proof of the truth of the libel could be used as a legitimate defense," McCullough notes that George Washington supported the attacks on some publications and that Jefferson "having no wish to be present for the inevitable passage of the Sedition Act. . . quietly packed and went home to Monticello." Ultimately, McCullough concludes that it might have been Abigail Adams who "could well have been decisive in persuading Adams to support the Sedition Act" while Adams "appears to have said nothing on the subject at the time" (504–07).

In McCullough's assessment of his presidency, Adams implicitly joins Lincoln, who suspended habeas corpus during the Civil War, and Franklin Roosevelt, who interred thousands of Japanese Americans during World War II, as presidents forced to enact unpopular and unconstitutional measures during times of war. Furthermore, McCullough makes Adams a reluctant participant in the story of the Alien and Sedition Acts, spurred on by his Federalist comrades in Congress, fearful of lurking enemy spies in the streets of Philadelphia, and manipulated by his wife who feared for her husband's reputation. Indeed, there is little else in *John Adams* that most clearly demonstrates McCullough's overt attempt to transform the public reputation and to shape the collective memory of his subject than in the discussion of the Alien and Sedition Acts.

David McCullough's account of the life of John Adams figured prominently in the refashioning of the collective memory of this important American personage and it is not surprising that McCullough would also play a pivotal role in the public deliberations about a proposed Adams Memorial. What is surprising was the way McCullough sought to establish Adams's reputation. As he worked for greater historical visibility for John Adams, greater appreciation for Adams's contributions to the nation's founding, McCullough frequently relied on affective rhetorics of praise and admiration that dominate contemporary celebrity politics.

Historical Celebrity and the Legacy of John Adams

The Romans called it *fama*, or *celebritas*, and it was a decidedly indistinct term in that ancient society.⁵ In classical Latin, as Chris Rojek reveals, the root term for celebrity was *celebrem* "which has connotations with both 'fame' and 'being thronged'" (9). Though transient, the idea of "celebrity" is a cornerstone of contemporary American

life, just as the Romans were “animated by the urge for fame, [where] the definition of achievement was almost entirely oriented toward public behavior.” Leo Braudy notes, “Fame for public action was so important to the Romans, as it was to the Homeric Greeks, because in a religion without a developed concept of the afterlife it was the only way to live beyond death” (17). The cultural preoccupation with the deaths, especially the premature or suspicious demise of contemporary public figures, enacts a similar celebrity afterlife at work in contemporary times. Such roots are important because they “indicate a relationship in which a person is marked out as possessing singularity, and a social structure in which the character of fame is fleeting” (Rojek 9).

The present-day concept of “celebrity” began in the late eighteenth century, according to Thomas Baker. Baker discovers the roots of “a self-sustaining culture of celebrity” in the period from 1790 to 1830 when “the market for access to renown . . . assumed an enhanced scope and intensity,” most clearly evidenced by the popularity of autographs (7).⁶ Of course, Baker’s conclusions speak to the power of celebrity in the early years of the American nation, when the Founders were presidents and the founding period was slowly becoming the stuff of collective memory. By the twentieth century, Hollywood and network television capitalized on an extant celebrity culture and moved the construction of celebrities to a new level (Dixon; Fowles). These media celebrities became, in the words of Guy Debord, “spectacular representations of living human beings, distilling the essence of the spectacle’s banality into images of possible roles” (38). Now, celebrities and their plentiful public discourse significantly define our culture.

Celebrities are venerated not because of the rational power of their discourse, not because of the intelligence of their arguments, or even the worthiness of their accomplishments, but because they provoke highly affective reactions from audiences and from the larger culture. As such, celebrity power is both strong and illusory because contemporary celebrities exist in a state of ambiguity. Celebrities rise and fall quickly, are the subject of both reverence and ridicule, and are pawns in larger social, economic, and media systems over which they may or may not possess control. As Joshua Gamson reveals, celebrity culture, or the discourse that creates celebrity, is characterized by: “the trivialization of endeavor, commitment, and action; visibility as its own reward; the elimination of distinctions between deserving and undeserving people; the seductive replacement of real life with artificial image; and the increased inability to make such distinctions”(10).

Ultimately, as P. David Marshall suggests, “the concept of celebrity is best defined as a system for valorizing meaning and communication” (x). It is the process by which such valorization occurs that is of profound significance for contemporary communication inquiry. Of more interest than what celebrities actually say is the process by which an individual comes to occupy celebrity status and to command celebrity attention. In addition, as Greg Siegworth argues, contemporary celebrity culture requires the celebrity to engage in his or her own celebritization and to authenticate such rhetorics for the larger public (307).

Political and historical leaders are constructed according to the systems of discourse commonly found in celebrity culture.⁷ “Celebrityhood pervades the political

process,” conclude Darrell West and John Orman in their text on the subject, “from campaigns and elections to governing, lobbying, and legislating” (ix). When political celebrityization occurs, the “symbolic content of the political leader as commodity arises primarily from the similar groundwork of common cultural sentiments” (Marshall 214). Cultural myths, legends, narratives, and tokens dominate the celebrityization of the individual political leader, allowing audiences, as citizens and voters, to access familiar rhetorics in their evaluation of the proffered individual. The same grammars may also dominate the creation of the collective memory of historical figures.

David Lusted reveals that the dominant cultural myths at work in the construction of celebrities are grounded in competing conceptions of the individual. The first myth “stresses individual achievement through personal effort and competition,” while the second is a “folk myth. . . in which the individual succeeds through nature or fate, rather than effort, position, or circumstance” (251). Regardless of the actual myth employed in the celebrityization process, its preeminent locus of motivation is affective rather than deliberative. As Marshall notes, “Affect moves the political debate from the realm of reason to the realm of feeling and sentiment.” Moreover, through such affect, the political and historical celebrity “functions as a legitimating apparatus for the symbolic representation of the people” (240). Affectivity, thus, becomes the measure of successful celebrityization. And it is affect that is presented through this process as the preferred mode of deliberation and decision-making—the basis of political judgment becomes feeling and emotion, not rationality or reasonability. Put another way, as does Gamson, “the ‘politics of personality,’ commonly opposed to the ‘politics of substance,’ has become institutionalized in contemporary American politics.” Furthermore, that political system “mimics, and sometimes borrows techniques directly from, entertainment celebrity” (189).

Called to testify before the Subcommittee on National Parks, Recreation, and Public Lands in the US House of Representatives, David McCullough unabashedly proclaimed his admiration for Adams.⁸ “He was brave. He was honest. His devotion to service, to the service of the country, to the public good, is beyond almost any other example,” McCullough testified. Adams was a “true patriot” who “was the first American to stand before King George III as our first minister to Great Britain, a farmer’s son, standing before the monarch of Great Britain, to represent the new independent Nation, surely one of the greatest moments, greatest scenes in American history.” McCullough called Adams the “voice of independence,” and incorrectly cited Jefferson saying that Adams was the “colossus of independence.”⁹ And he related a favorite story about Adams to prove his point:

In our rotunda, sir, hangs the great painting of the signing of the Declaration of Independence by John Trumbull, seen by thousands of tourists, thousands of visitors from all over the world, millions of people, year after year. If you study the painting, at the exact center, the focal point, with all of the devices that an artist uses to train the eye to come to the focal point clearly in evidence, clearly at work, at the exact center is John Adams, because those who were there knew that he was the man who made it happen.

McCullough frequently used Trumbull's painting to prove his point; it appeared in interviews McCullough gave to both CNN and NPR. Ultimately, McCullough concludes at the subcommittee hearings that "the idea that we have forgotten this man, that he has stood in the shadows all these years, does not reflect well on any of us."

McCullough's use of Trumbull's painting deserves special scrutiny as it so clearly reveals the contemporary tendency to venerate based in emotion and celebrity. We are asked, by McCullough, to commemorate Adams because of a visual representation of him as the prime mover, the very epicenter, of America's campaign for independence from England. As such, McCullough employs what Michael Osborn calls "depictive rhetoric," or "strategic pictures, verbal or nonverbal visualizations, that linger in the collective memory of audiences as representative of their subjects" (79). Such depictions, for Osborn, constitute the "symbolic moorings of human consciousness" and allow for the critical understanding of rhetorics not rooted in argument and proof, but rather in "those moments in which audiences encounter significant presentations of reality" that may "enjoy that particular authority we have ascribed to mythos" (97).

McCullough's use of the Trumbull painting to advance his position about Adams represents the reaffirmation function of the rhetorical depiction, or what Osborn defines as a rhetoric that "guards the sacred fire around which a nation or a subculture gathers periodically to warm itself in recognition of its being" (95). The Trumbull painting is familiar and accessible to American audiences, and certainly to the congressional representatives at the hearings, working just feet away from the actual painting itself. McCullough's depiction is epideictic in its use of Trumbull as it venerates the vision of Adams presented there so as to magnify his heroism. That McCullough repeated this tale so frequently speaks to its resonance, to its capacity to reaffirm and solidify identity and memory. Yet, upon closer examination, there are alternative readings of Trumbull's painting that undermine McCullough's interpretation.

Trumbull's *The Declaration of Independence* is, as his biographer notes, "a document of the Enlightenment. . . based on the faith that the rule of reason would bring order and justice to human society" (Jaffe 17). The painting was the result of an extended effort by the artist to accurately depict the gathering in Philadelphia and the men who came together to declare American independence; the aged artist was even present in 1826 (the year of Adams's death) with then President John Quincy Adams when the painting was unveiled in the new Rotunda of the US Capitol (Jaffe 19). Trumbull himself recounts meeting Adams in London where he admired the "color and nature curl" in Adams's unpowdered hair and "took the opportunity to paint his portrait in the small Declaration of Independence" (147).

A careful examination of the painting reveals that its focal point is the drafting committee of the Declaration, with Adams, Jefferson, and Benjamin Franklin given more prominence over Roger Sherman and Robert Livingston. While Adams is at the center of the painting, it is Jefferson who is the tallest figure in the rendition, portrayed in a stance "derived from the *ad locutio* pose which since Augustus Caesar has served as a proper image for statesmen and military heroes." Adams stands nearby in an "almost equally honored" position that was associated with Van Dyck's painting

of Charles I, according to Trumbull's biographer Irma Jaffe. Franklin is similarly honored with his head "set strongly in relief against the northwest door" (Jaffe 77–78, emphasis added).¹⁰

At the very least, McCullough's translation of *The Declaration of Independence* to fit his portrayal of Adams is an idiosyncratic reading of the painting, ignorant of important artistic and historical aspects of Trumbull's rendition of this pivotal moment in US history. More seriously, perhaps, is that McCullough's appropriation of this iconic American image in the service of his hagiography bespeaks the domination of visuality, the power of celebrity, in contemporary political discourse and in the collective memorializing of leaders past. McCullough seeks a monument for Adams not because Adams was actually central to the drafting of the Declaration of Independence, but because one artist two centuries ago painted him in a manner that might suggest that centrality.

For those attending the hearings, for those voting to erect a monument to John Adams in Washington, DC, the vision offered to them of our second president is decidedly rooted in celebrity, in the need for greater visibility and in our affective, emotional reaction to his obscurity for so many years. Joseph Ellis, another Adams biographer, testified to the subcommittee that Adams "is probably the most unappreciated great man in American history." Adams's "one-woman Cabinet" was Abigail Adams, according to Ellis, and "one of Adams's most important legacies is his family, which is arguably the greatest political and intellectual family in American political history."

In short, for Ellis and McCullough, the John Adams deserving of a monument in the nation's capital is a sanitized, celebritized image of this founder. We are invited, by their testimony, to ignore the Alien and Sedition Acts, to dismiss Adams's petulance and self-pitying, to bypass his overt partisanship and political failures. His fame and distinction come less from his accomplishments and more from our ignorance of them, less from his good will and prudence and more because of his offspring and the "love story" he shared with Abigail. The impact of McCullough's sanitation of Adams is evident in the final Senate report on the Adams Memorial, which stated, "Historian and author David McCullough contends that the force of John Adams's argument on the floor of the Second Continental Congress was critical in securing sufficient support for the Declaration of Independence." Mentioned also in the report are the Dutch loan, the fact that Adams was the first president to live in the White House, and that Abigail was an "early advocate of women's rights, a fierce patriot, and a staunch abolitionist" (United States 1–2). With the passage of H.R. 1668 in 2001, McCullough's quest for a memorial to John Adams and his family was fulfilled. That this passage was motivated, at least in part, by the celebritized construction of Adams's legacy is ironic at best, and potentially disturbing at worst for what it reveals about the state of contemporary political culture.

A Passion for Distinction: John Adams on Fame and Celebrity

In his classic indictment of political life in mid twentieth-century America, Daniel Boorstin concludes that the "root of our problem, the social source of these

exaggerated expectations, is in our novel power to make men famous” (46). Boorstin’s notion of manufactured fame and the pseudo-fame of celebrity politics may have seemed new in 1961. But his comments were hardly novel. One hundred and seventy-one years before Boorstin lamented the role of fame in creating celebrity, John Adams theorized that “There is none among them [the passions] more essential or remarkable, than the passion for distinction.” In his *Discourses on Davila*, a series of newspaper articles published in the *Gazette of the United States* in 1790, Adams concluded that “a desire to be observed, considered, esteemed, praised, beloved, and admired by his fellows, is one of the earliest, as well as keenest dispositions discovered in the heart of man” (25–26).¹¹ Adams’s discovery of this passion for distinction, the quest for fame, represents a shift in his thinking about the source of political motivation—as A.D. Morse concluded, the concept of a thirst for distinction replaced the broader principle of “the love of power” expressed in Adams’s earlier writings (294). This shift is not incidental, and its articulation makes Adams a prophetic commentator on the nature and substance of early (and contemporary) American political discourse. Adams’s commentaries, moreover, offer a compelling articulation of the role of fame, power, and celebrity in public life. They, thus, function to interrogate the very rhetorics of memory employed by David McCullough and others in the articulation and enactment of our collective memory of John Adams.

Power is manifested in a variety of ways—police power, economic power, political power. But distinction and fame are largely symbolic processes, where acclaim results from the rhetorical expression of approbation and respect. For Adams and the founders, then, as Douglass Adair reveals, pursuing fame “was a way of transforming egotism and self-aggrandizing impulses into public service; they had been taught that public service nobly (and selfishly) performed was the surest way to build ‘lasting monuments’ and earn the perpetual remembrance of posterity” (8). If fame is the main source of political motivation, and if the search for fame and distinction is at the basis of public virtue in a republican community, then that community becomes dependent upon the symbolic resources communicating distinction to the public—that community comes to rely, in Adams’s words, on a “language of signs.”

Adams specifically points to Roman society and its effective use of the “language of signs” as evidence of a nation “who understood the human heart.” In his discussion of Roman virtue, he maintains that “reason holds the helm, but passions are the gales: and as the direct road to these is through the senses, the language of signs was employed by Roman wisdom to excite the emulation and active virtue of the citizens.” He details the specific uses of clothing and jewelry by the Romans to confer distinction and to “attract the attention, to allure the consideration, and excite the congratulations of the people.” Ultimately, Adams concludes that “it is easy to see how such a scene must operate on the hearts of a nation: how it must affect the passion for distinction: and how it must excite the ardor and virtuous emulation of the citizens” (40–43). Little more works to explain how individuals are motivated to public service, in Adams’s vision, than the innate quest by all good people for distinction and reputation. What governments and communities do to confer that fame

or, in his words, the language of signs they employ—is critical for this most basic of human passions to succeed in promoting the public good.

A cornerstone of Adams's sense of public fame and reputation is, as James Farrell has convincingly argued, the performance of public oratory. Rooted in his understanding and appreciation of Cicero, Adams “decided that oratorical distinction was one promising path to glory” (“John Adams’s *Autobiography*” 508), according to Farrell, and he “never lost his desire to achieve fame as a statesman-orator” (“John Adams’s *Autobiography*” 510). The oratorical model, and the virtue that he saw in Cicero, also figured Adams's sense of presidential leadership, where strong presidents emerge because they manifest “moral conduct, patriotic eloquence, prudent deliberation, independent and courageous action,” as Farrell notes (“Classical Virtue” 82). Again, Farrell's work, and Adams's pursuit of oratorical excellence, speak to the symbolic nature of this founder's political theory, where the rhetorical achieves eminence as a marker of public virtue and personal merit.

The manifestations of fame and the means by which citizens learned about the distinction of their leaders were clearly of central concern in Adams's political theories. Fame had its roots in a “voice within us,” according to Adams, “which seems to intimate, that real merit should govern the world; and that men ought to be respected only in proportion to their talents, virtues, and services” (50–51). Beauty, wealth, possessions, family lineage—such non-merit based sources of fame were illegitimate as markers of virtue for Adams. Instead, “real merit” is the test, rooted in good works and sound judgment. Indeed, the search for “real merit,” the attempt to discern such merit, is often detoured by powerful temperamental tendencies in human nature. According to Adams, “There is less disposition to congratulation with genius, talents, or virtue, than there is with beauty, strength and elegance of person; and less with these than with the gifts of fortune and birth, wealth and fame” (55). Here we see the differentiations that Adams sees between fame and celebrity—between real distinction and simple artifice.

John Adams, thus, offers a rather straightforward, arguably elitist, and certainly exclusive vision of fame and distinction that works as the foundation of his understanding of political psychology and leadership. Because of the importance of fame for his vision of political leadership, he fretted that communicating personal distinction to a large audience would be difficult, if not impossible. “Real merit,” wrote Adams, “is so remote from the knowledge of whole nations, that were magistrates to be chosen by that criterion alone, and by an universal suffrage, dissensions and venality would be endless.” Such merit is rare, in Adams's sense of leadership, eclipsed most often by the “artifice, dissimulation, hypocrisy, flattery, imposture, empiricism, quackery, and bribery” of those lacking in merit but seeking honor and fame (51). It is precisely at this juncture in Adams's theory of fame that we glimpse his visionary sense of contemporary preoccupations with celebrity.

Adams and the Perils of Celebrity Culture

There is perhaps no greater commentary on the tension between actual merit-based fame and the dangers of celebrity than in Adams's discussions, particularly

in letters to his long-time correspondent Benjamin Rush, of the public image of George Washington. This subject was a persistent theme in a series of letters spanning several years and Adams's insights indict the very tools and techniques of celebrity culture at work in McCullough's rendition of Adams's biography and in the historian's articulation of the need for an Adams memorial.

As Philip Abbott maintains in his study of presidential belatedness, Adams lived completely in the shadow of George Washington for much of his public career and, obviously, as president. During his presidency, Adams "suffered many humiliations, not the least was his party's attempt to bring back Washington once again as military commander." To this slight, Abbott notes, "Adams in retirement responded with justifiable monumental resentment" (224). Though reluctant to discuss the veneration of Washington publicly, Adams frequently expressed in his private letters "his unease with the emerging mythology about cherry trees and god-like wisdom" (Ellis 67).

A keen satirist and observer of the public life of his time, Adams astutely expressed, in a letter to Rush dated November 11, 1807, his vision of the constructed celebrity of George Washington when he delineated the ten talents he believed Washington possessed:

1. An handsome face. That this is a talent, I can prove by the authority of a thousand instances in all ages 2. A tall stature 3. An elegant form. 4. Graceful attitudes and movements. 5. A large, imposing fortune consisting of a great landed estate left him by his father and brother, besides a large jointure with his lady 6. Washington was a Virginian. This is equivalent to five talents. Virginian geese are all swans 7. Washington was preceded by favorable anecdotes They [the British] had exaggerated and misrepresented his defeat and capitulation, which interested the pride as well as compassion of Americans in his favor 8. He possessed the gift of silence. This I esteem as one of his most precious talents. 9. He had great self-command 10. Whenever he lost his temper as he did sometimes, either love or fear in those about him induced them to conceal his weakness from the world. Here you see I have made out ten talents without saying a word about reading, thinking, or writing, upon all which subjects you have said all that need be said. (Schutz and Adair 97–98)

Each of these talents, as Adams self-reflexively notes, is derived not from merit or accomplishment, but from personality, visage, or happenstance. They come from Washington's possession of wealth, his appearance, or his luck of circumstance—in short, the factors that made Washington his era's biggest celebrity. In this way, Adams's observations speak powerfully to the early nineteenth-century sense of political celebrity and the tensions that existed between such celebrity and the demarcation of public virtue and distinction.

Of course, similar standards of reputation and renown are present in David McCullough's recollections of John Adams. McCullough makes much of Adams's status as a New Englander, with all of the attendant character traits that suggests. McCullough is the master of "favorable anecdotes" in his rendition of Adams's biography. Just as Adams notes Washington's successful "jointure with his lady," so McCullough makes much of Adams's marriage to Abigail. And even if Adams

did not possess Washington's handsomeness or compelling visage, McCullough still highlights the visual and the physical in his invocation of the Trumbull painting as important to our memory of Adams.

That Adams resented Washington's celebrity is clear—he saw such adoration as designed to “cast disgrace upon Washington's two successors, Adams and Jefferson.” He was particularly appalled by the Fourth of July celebrations at Boston's Faneuil Hall, where “Washington's picture is placed behind the table of the principal magistrates, Hamilton's opposite to him in the most conspicuous spot in the whole hall, while the pictures of Samuel Adams and John Hancock are crowded away in two obscure corners.” One wonders where Adams's own picture figured in this scene at Boston's famous hall. In the same 1808 letter to Rush, Adams remarked, “At the time of Hamilton's death, the Federal papers avowed that Hamilton was the soul and Washington the body, or in other words that Washington was the painted wooden head of the ship and Hamilton the pilot and steersman. Thus the world goes, has ever gone, and ever will go. And so let it go” (Schutz and Adair 103–05). A year later, reflecting on the celebrations of Washington's birthday in Boston, Adams wrote to Rush that “I allow Washington, Hamilton, and Ames all their real merit, but many others much more important and deserving than either of them, instead of being honored, are studiously and systematically driven into oblivion” (Schutz and Adair 135). Still preoccupied with the same question in 1812, Adams remarked in another letter to Rush that “Washington and Franklin—I will go no further at present—killed all scandal by puffers. You and I have never employed them, and therefore scandal has prevailed against us” (Schutz and Adair 216–17). Puffing, what today we might call public relations or publicity, was the means to avoid scandal while it also, in Adams's vision, created a false sense of fame, a delusional reputation as a means of avoiding disrepute.

John Adams knew that his fame, his distinction, would go largely unrecognized. There is, indeed, no better demonstration of Adams's sharp understanding of political philosophy and the power of celebrity than his own self-reflection of his personal renown or lack thereof. Comparing himself to Cicero, Adams wrote to Rush, “Mausoleums, statues, monuments will never be erected to me. I wish them not. Panegyric romances will never be written, nor flattering orations spoken, to transmit me to posterity in brilliant colors” (Schutz and Adair 139). In Adams's estimation, the “history of our revolution will be one continued lie from one end to the other. The essence of the whole will be that Dr. Franklin's electrical rod smote the earth and out sprang General Washington” (qtd. in Haraszti 3). As Adair concludes, Adams's later years were preoccupied by “his lust for fame [that] soured into anguish and envy since he fear[ed] that his great contemporaries, Franklin, Washington, Jefferson, and Hamilton have unfairly robbed him of the honor that [was] rightfully his” (20–21).

Another view recognizes that Adams appreciated the power of celebrity in his own time, and while his lamentations about Washington, Franklin, Hamilton and others may seem a bit self-pitying, they still reveal much about the power of a nation, a community, to employ a “language of signs” in the construction of distinction. Adams's observations reveal the relevance of celebrity for his political theory. As C. Bradley

Thompson notes, for Adams “the entire art of political architecture ought to be grounded on devising institutional arrangements for the purpose of regulating and channeling its [the passion for distinction’s] dangerous and beneficial tendencies” (156). Adams sees danger when leaders are renowned for characteristics and attributes that have nothing to do with merit, prudence or conduct. But communities and politics have much to gain in Adams’s theory when this passion brings good people to government, offering the most virtuous leaders to the community and its citizens.

Conclusion

In his considered assessment of the ideological meanings of the commitment “not men, but measures,” the late Michael Calvin McGee reminded us that “human beings make up a government, not ‘measures’ or ‘issues’. The quality of a government is thus a function of the quality of Leadership, not of the policies advocated by [a] government” (153). McGee was correct in calling attention to the preoccupation in US politics to the stale, detached engagement with policy and his belief that character and leadership are central to democratic governance seems more and more relevant in the contemporary political environment. McGee’s conclusion about the nature of US political discourse echoes the historical insights offered in Adair’s discussion of fame and the Founders. As Adair notes, the United States was founded by “passionately selfish and self-interested” individuals who were giants because they had been led “to redefine their notions of interest.” “Through the concept of fame,” Adair continues, the Founders developed “a personal stake in creating a national system dedicated to liberty, to justice, and to the general welfare” (24).

But relying on character, fame, renown, leadership as the focal points of political life and activity is complicated. It is much more secure to base a community’s identity and its politics on policies, laws, or even abstract principles. There are consequences to a character-driven political culture, consequences recognized by Adams over 200 years ago, and that persist and continue to shape his historical legacy today. The uncertainty, the tenuousness, of rooting politics in personality and character are profound. After all, “the vulnerability and fluidity of human character are not comfortable foundations for a community’s identity” (Parry-Giles 377). Indeed, examining the construction of John Adams in the efforts by those seeking his memorialization reveals this very discomfort, and how through celebrityization the culture confronts that unease.

That David McCullough accessed and exploited the grammars of celebrity speaks to both the power of celebrity rhetoric in contemporary US political culture and to the cultural myopia in fully appreciating Adams’s legacy. For McCullough, Adams deserved recognition primarily because he was forgotten. His collective memory, according to McCullough’s telling, is rooted in our Founders nostalgia, in our collective guilt for forgetting him, and in emotional-laden dimensions of his personal narrative. There is also a visual dimension to McCullough’s construction of Adams’s celebrity, where the historian accesses the iconic painting by Trumbull to elevate his subject, to expand his reach and his emotional resonance for the community.

In his articulation of the rationale for an Adams memorial and in his rendition of Adams's story, McCullough operates at direct odds with Adams's own political philosophy. Adams saw the dangers of rhetorics aimed at promoting celebrity and he lamented the artificiality of the celebrities in his own time. And in his concern about his own legacy and the nature of his memory in the collective imaginary, Adams recognized how celebrity operates and the dangers of this cultural grammar for the articulation of history and biography. Adams speaks specifically to his own legacy, his own place within the collective memory, and his fervent hope that that legacy is based not on what he disdained so much—the features of a celebrity—but on an honest, clear appraisal of his accomplishments.

As he considered his own legacy, and discussed fame, celebrity, and political psychology, John Adams offered a normative vision of the “language of signs” that characterizes political discourse about character. In so doing, Adams also prescribed a vision for the rhetorical articulation of collective memory, a discursive means of assessing public virtue in the determination of historical legacy. Unfortunately, in his exuberance to resurrect Adams's legacy, David McCullough ignored the lessons of his subject and fell prey to the same vapid rhetorics of celebrity that so tragically dominate so much contemporary discourse. In so doing, McCullough revealed much about the mechanisms of collective memory in contemporary America while simultaneously betraying the very legacy of the man he sought to elevate.

John Adams was a remarkable figure. His leadership in securing the Dutch loan, in arguing for independence, in acting to prevent war with France, and in so many other aspects of pre-Revolutionary and post-Revolutionary life should be praised and honored. But to cleanse Adams and his legacy of all blemishes, to pretend that he was something he was not, is to do him a disservice. As Bruce Miroff argues, “The ideas and the career of John Adams provide rich material for reflection on the character of political leadership in America” (81). John Adams, it seems, would want his fame to reflect the entirety of his record, and while it may be true that he is ignored or forgotten, it is also the case that in aspects of his public life, he made judgments and enacted policies that deserve scorn. “Adams was also prescient,” notes Miroff, “in diagnosing the ways in which political appearances could be falsified and political virtue corrupted in the American republic” (81). If we operate as does David McCullough, where we historically ignore or downplay the errors in judgment, the flaws in character, of Adams or any historical celebrity that is venerated in America's rendition of its past, we give way to the dangers of celebrity culture where all that matters is the puffery, the good, and the visible. John Adams and his historical legacy deserve better.

Notes

- [1] A considered discussion of the constructedness of Washington's persona and character is offered by Longmore.
- [2] My sense of “rhetorical grammars” borrows from Sanford Schram's understanding of “grammars” as a dominant discourse derived from a series of discursive practices and norms. See Schram 215, note 1.

- [3] For additional commentary on Adams as a political theorist, see Appleby 578-95 and Kurtz 605-13.
- [4] Collective memory and its political and historical consequences are also discussed in Browne, "Remembering" 169-87 and Cox 1-13.
- [5] For the etymological and historical roots of celebrity, see Braudy 17 and Gamson 17-19.
- [6] A different perspective on the history of celebrity culture argues that it is a twentieth-century phenomenon, inextricably linked to the mass communication forms of film and television. See Schickel; Gabler. For a discussion of the role of fame in the political life of colonial and revolutionary America, see Adair.
- [7] See Edelman for the foundational discussion of the symbolic construction of public leaders.
- [8] All citations are from McCullough's remarks to the subcommittee on June 12, 2001. See U.S. House 41-43.
- [9] Historian Richard N. Rosenfeld revealed after McCullough's book was published that Jefferson did not actually say that Adams was a "colossus of independence." See Kirkpatrick 10.
- [10] It is worth noting that Jefferson was critical to the commissioning of Trumbull to produce the paintings for the Capitol Rotunda. Jefferson's recommendation, according to Garry Wills, "helped Trumbull, in his beleaguered old age, win congressional approval for the scheme to decorate the Rotunda of the Capitol with scenes of civic and military heroism" (111).
- [11] Adams's writings in the *Discourses* are heavily dependent upon the theories of Adam Smith and his *Theory of Moral Sentiment*. For a detailed discussion of the connections between Adams's work and Smith's, see Haraszti 165-179. Miroff rehabilitates Adams discussion of fame as a political motivation somewhat, noting that Adams "developed the political implications of 'the passion for distinction' in a manner that went well beyond anything in Smith's text" (369, note 10).

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