

JOHN QUINCY ADAMS, SLAVERY AND THE GAG RULE

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John Quincy Adams is generally imagined as a man of cold calculation and legalistic devotion to cause and politics. Study of the issue of slavery and the "gag rule," however, places Adams somewhere between this traditional characterization and that of the highly vociferous and emotional abolitionists. This project looks for the real Adams as revealed through his diary and memoirs from his earliest recorded rejection of slavery, in 1820, to his death over a quarter of a century later. The tragedy of Adams was that while his abhorrence of slavery was inextirpable, so was his belief in the American political system. The result was his struggle to win the right to petition Congress for the termination of slavery. His victory over "slaveocracy" was a victory for constitutionalism and anti-slavery. Out of all this emerged a more human and likable John Quincy Adams.

Many of his contemporaries and latter day historians attacked John Quincy Adams on various points concerning the slave controversy. He was accused of being everything from an outright John Greenleaf Whittier-type abolitionist to one who hanged his morals for the sake of political expediency. But Adams was neither of these. To understand his actions in the House of Representatives, relative to the "Gag Rule," one must understand his ideas on slavery and abolition. Public speeches and congressional debates give only the outward appearance of the man. For example, in his 1941 article on this subject, Robert P. Ludlum depended too heavily on public pronouncements and came up with a somewhat distorted view of Adams (1, pp. 203-43; 2, pp. 40-41, 123-27; 3, pp. 129-35). Public statements serve only as a guide and cannot provide sufficient insight into Adams' true feelings. This work, therefore, concerns itself primarily with the personal papers of Adams in order to discover what he felt and said privately. One must keep in mind the importance which the Adams family had traditionally attached to constitutional means to an end and, especially, John Q. Adams' individualistic stand on political questions. It is also important to understand that, in society and politics, the abolitionist was an outcast.

While Secretary of State, Adams made the first important entry in his diary concerning his views on slavery (dated 11 February, 1820) (4, pp. 21-22; 5, v. V, p. 4). On this day, he had gone to the Senate

Chamber to hear Rufus King elucidate his position on the Missouri question. That evening, Adams attended a private party given by the John C. Calhouns, and he reported that nearly the entire evening was spent discussing King's address. The Secretary of State was shocked at the slaveholder's obvious display of hate and articulate ability to support their "peculiar institution." It seemed that eloquence and contentiousness were on the side of "oppression." Cool judgement and common sense were assets of "freedom," he noted, but there was no one to speak for it and attack the pretentious slaveholders. It was a duty to God and humanity to find such a man, but, for the season, Adams was willing to confine his opinions to his candlelight companion — his diary (4, p. 226). Perhaps, if for no other reason, it was to keep the "Era of Good Feelings" alive. This was an election year.

Some days later, Adams and Calhoun had a long, private conversation during which the question of the probability of a union divided over slavery was raised. Calhoun admitted that such a possibility existed (with a resulting alliance between the South and Great Britain), to which Adams secretly replied that such action would certainly be followed by universal emancipation. Following the Cabinet meeting of 3 March 1820, Adams was told by the champion of "slaveocracy" that slavery was just and right, since it was the best guarantee of equality among the "white race." Adams voiced his disagreement in no uncertain terms, saying

that human bondage "establishes false estimates of virtue and vice; for what can be more false and heartless than this doctrine which makes the first and holiest rights of humanity to depend upon the color of the skin?" (4, pp. 228, 231-32).

Thus, Adams had early expressed his opinion of slavery, but neither the world nor Calhoun was conscious of its implications. Throughout his presidential career, however, the sage of Quincy remained silent. Neither in his private correspondence nor in public statements did he mention the issue further. Yet, there can be no doubt that he continued to hold his earlier belief. Adams felt compelled to spend most of these years fighting for government-sponsored internal improvements, against the "Corrupt Bargain" accusations of Andrew Jackson and associates, and Georgia's incursion into Indian lands. More often than not, his was a solitary position.

Shortly after leaving the White House, Adams was sought after and elected to the House of Representatives from the Plymouth District of Massachusetts. In 1831, he launched an active and controversy-ridden sixteen-year congressional career. Adams was immediately inundated with petitions demanding the abolition of slavery and slave trade in the District of Columbia. His initial statement in the House was in connection with their presentation. Reassuring himself and the petitioners, Adams stated that no matter what his views on slavery were, he could not support the petitions. This was neither the time nor the place to discuss them. After all, South Carolina was up in arms over the "Tariff of Abominations" and threatening secession over "northern oppression." He politically asked that they be referred to the Committee on the Affairs of the District of Columbia (6, Part II, p. 1426; 4, pp. 426-27; 7, pp. 352-53, 355).

A few days after Adams had presented these abolition petitions to the House, a member of the Society of Friends came to discuss the problem with him and to get reassurance about the Congressman's attitude on slavery. Adams told him that he abhorred the institution, but had decided not to press the issue when presenting the petitions, be-

cause it would likely lead to chaos and accomplish nothing (4, pp. 429-30). Long recognized as a nationalist, the former President was more concerned with securing national unity than in forcing such a dangerous issue.

In a letter to a friend in Providence, Adams explained more fully why he did not support emancipation in Washington. Primarily, he was concerned with avoiding sectional trouble. Also, he believed he was reflecting the wishes of most of his constituents. Besides, he did not think the petitioners were "competent" enough to pray Congress on such matters. But Adams wanted it understood, nonetheless, that he did not abide with slavery (5 v. IV, pp. 434-36).

From the commencement of his new congressional career, then, Adams began to introduce abolition petitions, memorials, and resolutions into the House. Such agitation was bound to draw stern reaction from southern and moderate northern congressmen. Yet it must be noted that not once did he mention concern for his personal safety.

In the ensuing years, there were many attempts to muffle Adams. On 18 May, 1836 calamity struck. A special committee had been formed to consider the subject and placed under the chairmanship of Henry L. Pinckney of South Carolina. Pinckney proposed to the House three resolutions which eventually stifled men like Adams. Pinckney declared that Congress had no authority to interfere with slavery in the states, it ought not oppose it in the District, and all slavery petitions, memorials, and related materials should be tabled immediately without discussion. Actually, Adams had voted for the first two proposals earlier, but now he tried, unsuccessfully, to be recognized and speak against all three. Speaker James K. Polk gave the floor instead to George W. Owens of Savannah, who promptly moved for a vote. The Pinckney proposal was received 95 to 82. "Am I gagged or am I not?" cried Adams (8, Part II, pp. 2491-98; 7, pp. 358-59).

When it came time to vote on each of Pinckney's resolutions, Adams tried des-

perately to get the floor. It was not until after the first was adopted that he succeeded.

For years, Adams had fought almost constantly in the House for the chance to say what he wanted about slavery and abolition. Sometimes he would shout something as his name was called out on roll-call vote or when he presented petitions. He had another maneuver that was more complicated, but nonetheless effective. This was to gain recognition by the chairman to comment on a completely unrelated subject, and to twist words and phrases in such a way that the House would soon find itself listening to arguments Adams had tried to present earlier. Before proceeding to the second and third Pinckney resolutions, for instance, the House turned to the regular business of the day, the distribution of rations to refugees from Indian hostilities. Once debate on the subject began, Adams gained recognition and, assuming that indeed the country was engaged in war with the Indians, turned the question into what wartime powers Congress had to preserve the general welfare of all the people in the United States. In the case of a "servile war," into which he felt the slaveholders were leading the country, Congress would then extend its powers to interfere with slavery everywhere, he told them (8, Part III, pp. 3758-78; 5, v. IX, 298; 5, v. X, pp. 199-200; 7, p. 363). But Adams was not advocating war. The free states were not yet sufficiently united nor strong enough for that. He was simply opening the way for others to join him and carry on the fight for the good and great cause against slavery, and for the right of petition.

The relief proposal was adopted, and the House turned to Pinckney's second resolution. Adams asked to be excused from voting. He offered no explanation for the action, but Samuel Flagg Bemis says he probably did not want to commit himself publicly on what he had been saying for some time, i.e., that Congress should not abolish slavery in Washington. Abolitionism was much too harsh a way to deal with slavery (9, p. 331; 2, p. 160). Obligingly, Polk passed him by.

Adams did not remain silent long, however. When the vote on the third resolution was called for, he, being first on the roll,

got to his feet and shouted that it was a violation of the Constitution, the House rules, and the rights of petitioners. Polk paid no attention to the former President and the resolution was passed (8, Part IV, pp. 4046-47; 4, p. 491; 7, p. 360). The gag was tied.

Though Adams was gagged, neither he nor the petitioners were silenced. A battle had been lost, not the war. Hundreds of thousands of petitions reached his office within the next year. In spite of the fact that most of his efforts were embroiled in the right-of-petition fight, he still found time to ponder the general question of slavery. He would still admit that he knew little about the finer points of the system, and thought he was spending entirely too much time on it. And yet Adams would not openly commit himself. He repeatedly refused Whittier's invitations to attend anti-slavery conventions. Going that far would allow political and editorial enemies to hack him to pieces. This would either silence the voice of abolition in Congress or, at least, more securely muffle it. It was a sincere fear on his part. Adams was between two evils. The route he had chosen was confusing, and he did not know exactly how to plot his course, but it was his first route, and he was not willing to abandon it (4, pp. 477-79, 482-83, 493; 7, p. 365; 5, v. IX, pp. 343, 349, 437, 479).

Adams' feelings about slavery were not confined to the social and political spectrum, for they flowed over into his religious world as well. It was disturbing to him to see the lack of attendance at worship, and he attributed it to the increasing gulf between theoretical and applied religion, especially as it concerned slavery. Ministerial attempts to justify slave holding by using scriptures was just as fallacious to him as it would be to use the Bible to support the extermination of Indians as an obedience to some divine command. Adams felt his religion deeply, and expressed it often (4, pp. 477, 493; 510; 5, v. IX, pp. 543-44; 10).

As he grew older and more senile, Adams became more of a crusader for the right of petition. The "Gag Rule" was continually renewed to shut off petitions relating to

slavery at every session of Congress. At the same time, he became more cautious about immediate abolition. To press for it now would be disastrous, he feared. To those who asked if he thought the South would "depart" from the union should slavery be abolished in Washington, Adams replied that South Carolina might, but no other state would do it (5, v. X, pp. 39, 60-63, 132).

In the 1840 session the "Gag Rule" was made a permanent fixture of the House. But Adams found other ways to present his petitions. Whenever he struck out on a new path of anti-slavery, he did so with the knowledge of what might befall him. His firmness could be dismissed by simply saying that because of his age, Adams felt he had very little to lose. When he began to commit himself, his private works reveal another picture. The *Amistad* case (11) serves as a sufficient example. Aboard this Spanish ship, slaves had mutinied, had been captured by an American warship off Long Island, and carried to New London in 1839. The lower courts upheld the Negroes' claims to freedom and the case was pending before the Supreme Court when Adams became involved by speaking out vehemently in a hostile House and then before the bench on their behalf. He was not unaware of the personal danger involved, but he believed he was pressing a point in the name of God and humanity. He was, nonetheless, very frightened of the consequences (4, pp. 518-19; 5, v. XI, p. 159; 7, pp. 367, 376; 12; 13). Indeed, he had a great deal to lose — his life.

The long, monotonous years suffered under the "gag" and the belief that he would soon die made Adams increasingly angry with slavery. His statements in public and private became more venomous. By the summer of 1843, he was calling slavery a "hideous" violation of everything the country was supposed to stand for. Yet, he admitted, it did give him much to wax eloquent about. And before he died he meant for the world to know where he stood (5, v. XI, pp. 381, 406).

In 1844, Adams' congressional gag was lifted, but not without a determined seven-year battle of wits. This was his moment

of victory, and he thanked God for deliverance (5, v. X, pp. 115-16).

After being freed from the "gag," Adams continued his opposition to slavery with perhaps more gusto than before. He did not, apparently, alter his opinion of the inferiority of Negroes, but argued that it had no relation to the question of emancipation. Slavery was evil, and that was that. The gag was gone, but he became more convinced than ever that "slavocracy" was dangerous to the union, and the annexation of Texas was an issue making the danger more paramount. Adams was not beyond accepting a temporary division of the union, if it meant ending slavery, but it was a ridiculous price to pay. The pressure Adams felt put upon him by voracious Southerners did not lend itself to making him accept union at any cost (5, v. XII, pp. 22, 37, 135-36, v. III, pp. 477-478). Why, he wondered, should one constantly try to maintain union with a people whose way of life made the Constitution a "menstruous rag?" (4, v. XIII, p. 171)

Here, apparently, Adams ended his private comments on slavery. For all practical intent and purposes, his slave fight was over. Surely in his mind it was not, but in the last few years of life his energies were spent more on the constitutional ramifications of the right of petition (especially as it concerned the annexation of new territories) and less on the slavery controversy per se.

Historians have pointed out that Adams was a crusader, and more often than not he stood alone with his chest bared when fighting for what he believed. The former President was not overly concerned with his own safety, as shown in his *Amistad* and right-of-petition fights. With this in mind, a question naturally arises from this work. Why, if he found slavery so repugnant, did Adams not fight for abolition openly? He sincerely feared that a "servile war" would erupt, engulf the nation, and result in the general denial of constitutional rights. Fighting for internal improvements and petition rights could be done within the walls of the House chamber, but to become an abolitionist would remove Adams from his beloved, political position and family circles and

place him outside the realm of normality." This was what befell most abolitionists. Besides, his many other solitary stands would not endanger the union as would an early and premature fight for emancipation. Adams' best tactic, then, was to fight for what he believed and do it in the way he best saw fit. That is, he would carry the sword as a member of Congress and society, insist that he was not intimidated by threats of secession, and let others like William Furness and John C. Whittier work from the abolitionist camp, which he would protect.

Had Adams been thinking of his political career only, he would never have ventured along the path that he did. For a politician, it spelled suicide, but for a moral crusader, it was the only way. A Whittier-type abolitionist he was not, and he expressed this over and over. Slavery was certainly anathema to Adams, but to list him among the abolitionists would be an injustice. Still, Adams respected their rights to feel as they did and made every effort to see that their petitions and memorials were received. When reviewed closely, the former President wanted slavery abolished, but he was seeking a more peaceful means to that end than were the outspoken abolitionists. Despite his illusions to the contrary, he probably wanted gradual emancipation with compensation. Here he failed. Adams' victory for the right of petition was a victory for abolitionists and Adams, but not for slaves. He could not find a workable solution to the problem, save through war. Never did he discover a peaceful answer. Perhaps this can be blamed more on Congress than on Adams, as the other congressmen never ceased pressuring him long enough for a plan to be worked out. He could have left the House to fight, but his determination and

devotion to constitutional means to end slavery were his only weapons. They were best employed for national consumption in the House, not in the netherland of abolitionists.

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