

Off to a bad start: John Adams's tussle over titles

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From the first days, of the first session, of the first Congress of the United States, the Senate was consumed by an issue that would do immense and lasting political harm to the sitting vice president, John Adams. The issue was a seemingly unimportant one: titles. Adams had strong opinions on what constituted a proper title for important officers of government and, either because he was unconcerned or unaware of the damage it would cause, placed himself in the middle of the brewing dispute. Adams hoped the president would be referred to as, "His highness, the President of the United States of America, and Protector of the Rights of the Same." The suggestion enraged many, amused some, and was supported by few. He lost the fight over titles and made fast enemies with several of the Senators he was constitutionally obligated to preside over. Adams was savaged in the press, derided in the Senate and denounced by one of his oldest and closest friends. Not simply an isolated incident of political tone-deafness, this event set the stage for the campaign against Adams as a monarchist and provided further proof of his being woefully out of touch.

From the first days, of the first session, of the first Congress of the United States, the Senate was consumed by an issue that would do immense and lasting political harm to the sitting vice president, John Adams. The fight was over titles; specifically, which, if any, should be given to the first and second officers of government. The constitution simply referred to the offices as "president" and "vice president" but this was unacceptable to some, principally Adams. He felt the constitutionally given monikers lacked the dignity and respect that should be shown to the men ultimately selected to fill the positions. Such insignificant titles would breed familiarity and contempt among not only the citizens of America but foreign leaders as well. While this may appear to be a simple disagreement over a relatively insignificant issue, Adams's handling of the dispute magnified its importance. It was not his place to engage in such a disagreement in the first place; he was supposed to preside over debate, not lead it. The zeal and lack of aplomb with which he overstepped his bounds alienated all but his closest allies in the Senate. By refusing to let the issue lie, he solidified the contempt many felt towards him and won the scorn of one of his closest friends.

Adams felt strongly about the issue of titles. In order to have a stable and orderly government he believed it was necessary to show proper respect for its officers. Citizens needed forms and symbols to signify status and to facilitate a proper deference to authority. He believed that a country must give its leaders titles that reflect the import of their station.

Titles were simply proper etiquette, something which Adams adamantly believed a country could not continue to function without. "Can insubordination be prevented in the smallest society without distinction?"¹ He certainly did not think so.

Adams even constructed an amusing, if pointed, story justifying his beliefs. "Had I leisure to write plays... I would undertake a comedy under the title 'Government without Titles.'" The cast would be composed of a Quaker and his wife, their children and several servants. "They should live in the same room, dine, breakfast and sleep at the same table – they should promiscuously call each other by their names, without titles and live without form." Adams was convinced of the chaos that would invariably ensue. "The sons would soon be married to the female servants and the daughters to the male."² Even worse, the children and their servant spouses would soon curse and abuse the old man and woman. While Adams referred to this as a comedy, it was clearly no laughing matter. "Family titles are necessary to family government, Colonial titles are indispensable in Colonial government; and we shall find national titles essential to national government."³ Adams considered those who did not see that a government without titles would never thrive, nor long survive, fools. "Let us not betray such gross ignorance of the world."⁴

Adams also worried about the stability and longevity of the emerging United States and felt that the dispensing of titles would go a long way to solidifying its foundation. He felt that a national

government so weak in comparison to the states would have trouble attracting and keeping talented men. His solution: titles. “The Title of Right Honourable would raise the Senate and make it an object of ambition.” If only such a title could be added to senators then able men “would be willing to leave their places at home to obtain it.” Adams feared that if no such title were given to senators, “one half will resign before two years.”⁵ He earnestly believed titles would act as a magnet, drawing the rich and powerful from all corners of the country to the seat of the federal government. Titles, Adams prophesied, “would cost much less & would be less dangerous to Liberty” than almost any other scheme for strengthening the federal government.⁶

As for what specifically the chief executive should be called, Adams had a few thoughts. One he clearly did not like was president and he wondered, “What will the common people of foreign countries – what will the sailors and soldiers say, ‘George Washington, President of the United States?’” His answer, “They will despise him.”⁷ There were presidents of fire companies and cricket clubs, and therefore such a simple title would not suffice for so important a figure as the leader of a country. Adams felt the title given to this man “must be something that includes all the dignities of the diplomatic corps, and something greater still.”⁸

“Most Illustrious and Most Excellent [would] not suffice for the head of a great and independent nation,” and thus it, too, was excluded as an acceptable alternative. Instead, Adams felt “His Highness” or “if you will, His Most Benign Highness is the correct title that will comport with his constitutional prerogatives and support his state in the minds of our own people or foreigners.”⁹ This suggestion did not last long and upon further reflection he concluded that “Highness was not high enough.”¹⁰ He now believed “representatives in the executive authority,” and by this he meant Washington and himself, should be given “the title of Majesty.”¹¹ Had he had his way, then, His Majesty George would have been the country’s first President and His Majesty John its first VP.

While many of Adam’s justifications for the use of titles were compelling, there was something bizarre about the whole affair. The zeal with which he pursued the subject, at a time when aristocracy and the trappings of nobility were so obviously out of fashion, made him seem absurd and out of touch. It was bad politics from the beginning and made worse by his tireless pursuit of the issue. Ultimately, however correct Adams may have been,

the argument was not his to have. Had he been the senator from Massachusetts his actions would have been utterly appropriate. Instead, he was the Vice President and was supposed to sit and listen, to patiently preside over the Senate and not engage in arm-twisting.

The battle begins

One of the most striking aspects of the issue of titles is the speed and intensity with which Adams leapt into the fray. He arrived in New York on April 20, 1789, was sworn in on the 21st, and on the 23rd, with barely enough time to have unpacked, Adams launched his campaign over titles.¹² He began with a lengthy speech trumpeting the merits of titles and providing historical support for his position reaching back to the ancient Romans.¹³ The debate was begun by Adams on the very first day of the very first session of the First United States Congress. While his enthusiasm for the subject may have been off-putting, his reception was, at least initially, cordial.

The next day Adams again was the first to bring up titles and now faced the resistance of other senators. Several unhappy senators objected, and a vote was called to decide whether all discussion of titles should be ended permanently. Adams prevailed. Satisfied that he had the support of the Senate, he then moved on to the question of how he ought to address the Speaker of the House, Frederick Muhlenberg, a man he would have deal with often. From the notes of debate it appears many assumed the question was a simple formality and did not require a response. Adams was perfectly serious and only after again insisting on their advice did they suggest the Speaker be referred to as “honorable.” This exchange was all it took for William Maclay, a Senator from Pennsylvania, to form an unfavorable opinion of the vice president. Maclay wrote, “from this Omen, I think [Adams] may go and dream about Titles for none will he get.”¹⁴

The following day, April 25th, Adams once again turned to the Senate for advice, this time on how he should conduct himself when Washington came to address the body for his swearing in. While many considered such problems of pretense superfluous, Adams most certainly did not. He felt matters of protocol deserved intense reflection and worried endlessly over such details. “I am Vice President, in this I am nothing, but I may be everything, but I am President also of the Senate. When the Presi-

dent comes into the Senate, what shall I be?" When Washington entered the Senate there could not be two presidents, and Adams pleaded for help, "I cannot be then, no Gentlemen I cannot, I cannot – I wish Gentlemen to think what I shall be."¹⁵ Apparently overcome with worry Adams threw himself back in his chair. A long silence followed Adams's outburst and Maclay writes that he was only barely able to keep his composure "God forgive me, for it was involuntary, but the profane Muscles of my face, were in Tune for laughter, in spite of my indisposition."¹⁶ Adams's theatricality was inappropriate and ill-advised. He was off to a poor start and this was only the third day of the session.

On the day of Washington's swearing in, April 30, Adams's nerves grew more jangled. He waited impatiently for his chance to address the Senate, once again seeking advice and reassurance. When others finished recounting the agenda for the day Adams seized the opportunity to speak and pleaded for help "Gentlemen I wish for the direction of the Senate, the President will I suppose address the Congress and how shall I behave, how shall I receive him, shall I be standing or sitting."¹⁷ Notes show several senators spoke up only to say how insignificant they considered the question; others felt he should follow the example set by the leader of the House of Commons when the king spoke; still others felt no special ceremony was deserved. The remainder of the day up until Washington's inauguration was spent on this issue. Adams had hijacked the agenda to assuage his own neuroses.

The next day Adams saw an opening to not-so-subtly bring up the question of titles, and he acted fast. That day's session was to begin with a reading by the Secretary of the Senate of Washington's inaugural address. No sooner had the reading begun when objections arose in a chorus from the Senate floor. The Secretary had referred to Washington's address as "His Most gracious Speech."¹⁸ To Adams, such a superlative would have been perfectly benign, an empty but required platitude. Many others disagreed. The words prefixed to the speech were objected to on the grounds that they too closely resembled the customs of the English government following a speech by the king. Having just fought a war to rid the continent of that same king, the idea of instituting a procedure mimicking Britain's was less than popular.

Adams was thunderstruck by the objection and rose to express his dismay that such a simple gesture could elicit even the slightest objection. He wondered how a practice could be despised only

because of the country from which it originated. Already in a hole, what Adams said next amounted to continued digging. He was perplexed that the Senate would object to a practice that originated in "that Government under which we had lived so long and so happily formerly."¹⁹ The reaction was swift and venomous, and Adams was forced to silence the objections by declaring the objectors out of order. He demanded silence and went on to finish his defense of the prefixed words but to no avail. One by one the objectors rose to say that the people of the United States, having fought a war against that same government, now abhor the practices of the English monarchy. They believed the Senate should work to ensure no such monarchical practices should ever be allowed to infiltrate their emerging democracy. The objectors then set to determining whose suggestion the aggrandizement was. Adams leapt to his own defense and admitted full responsibility for the words' inclusion in the reading. He had indeed suggested their attachment but only because he could not have believed anyone would find offense. The objections continued and the matter of erasing the words was put to a vote Adams lost decisively.²⁰

Adams, oblivious to the growing hostility towards the subject of titles, urged the creation of a committee to study the issue and to recommend appropriate titles. A similar committee had already been created in the House and on May 5 both committees decided president and vice president would suffice. Adams persisted and a second Senate committee was convened, this time to invent a title for the president to be used by the Senate alone. The first rumblings of what potential titles for the president might be began to circulate. One option, taken from Poland, was "His Elective Majesty."²¹ It was seen as utterly ridiculous by many, but this was merely the opening act. On May 9 the committee brought forth its recommendation: "His Highness the President of the United States of America and Protector of the rights of the same."²² While Adams himself did not propose the title, it was the committee's recommendation. The members had been hand-picked by Adams and were among his closest allies. While he did not propose it, there was no doubt whose recommendation the title truly was.

"The most superlatively ridiculous thing I ever heard of," wrote Thomas Jefferson after hearing the proposed title.²³ Jefferson went beyond calling the label preposterous, he felt the proposal spoke to the mental health of Adams and concurred with the diagnosis given by Benjamin Franklin years

earlier. Jefferson wrote about Adams, “Always an honest man, often a great one, but sometimes absolutely mad.”²⁴

Maclay and several other senators tried to kill the issue entirely and indefinitely postpone discussion of titles. Adams was not to be swayed, and he stood and interrupted South Carolina’s Ralph Izard who was in the midst of explaining his own reasons for supporting postponement. “Up now got [Adams] and for 40 minutes did he harangue us.”²⁵ He began by lambasting Izard for an imagined out-of-order remark and then moved on to his favorite topic, titles. Izard was incensed and took to the floor to argue with Adams. He claimed the Constitution already provided a perfectly suitable title for the president and, moreover, the Constitution specifically stated that no title of nobility shall be granted by the United States. He declared all such talk of titles supremely ridiculous and clearly unconstitutional. Responding to Adams’s claim that foreign leaders would look down on such a simply titled president, Izard retorted, “I do not think it imports Us Much – perhaps the less they think or have occasion to think of Us the better.”²⁶ In addition, the unilateral application of a title for the president would clearly offend the House.

Adams acknowledged the likelihood that the Senate committee’s recommendation would provoke a dispute with the House and suggested that establishing a conference committee to iron out the differences between the two bodies might be the best solution. The compromise was put to a vote and succeeded.²⁷

Several days later the issue reemerged, and discussion was postponed until the second committee was prepared to give its report. Maclay noted that Izard and several other senators voiced complaints about Adams, specifically Adams’s tendency to “school the Members from the Chair.”²⁸ It was on this day that Izard coined the name Adams would long be referred to by his opponents: “His Rotundity.” Another senator, Robert Morris, said they had only made “Mr. Adams Vice President to keep him quiet.” Morris now regretted the decision. Maclay agreed and colorfully described to those gathered around him how ridiculous Adams appeared presiding over the Senate. “He will look on one side then on the other then down the Knees of his Breeches, then dimple his visage with the most silly kind of half smile.” He continued, “God forgive me for the Vile thought, but I cannot help thinking of a Monkey just put into Breeches when I see him betray such evident marks of Self conceit.”²⁹

Adams began to tire of the strain of Senate business and turned to the person he always turned to when things were bad, his wife Abigail. Being alone in New York and under attack was more than Adams could bear, and he begged Abigail to leave home at once. He told her that she ought not wait for money to arrive to begin her travels; she must sell “any Thing at any Rate rather than not come on. If, no one will take the Place leave it to the Birds of the Air and Beasts of the field.”³⁰ Adams was weary of fights with his colleagues and needed his wife to continue to endure. This was especially troubling since his plea for help was written not even a month after he first arrived in New York.

Finally, on May 14, the conference committee was prepared to report their findings and the results were read aloud to the Senate. They agreed that proper respect must be shown to the president but, in the interest of simplicity and so as not to further offend the House, there should be no special title given to the president. Several senators stood to offer their total agreement. They argued that the application of such lofty titles would smack of European aristocracy and must therefore be avoided at all costs. Haggling began over the exact wording for a resolution in support of the joint committee’s report, and some pressed for an immediate vote on the issue to conclude it once and for all. The Senate resolved to postpone indefinitely the consideration of the report and then voted to put a curious resolution on its files.³¹ The resolution asserted that its members would have liked to give the president some sort of title, but had not done so in deference to the wishes of the House of Representatives.³²

The issue that had occupied the Senate for nearly the entire first month of its existence had finally been put to rest. What could have been dealt with in a matter of days was continued thanks to Adams’s insistence. Maclay strongly believed that had it not been for Adams, “I am convinced the Senate would have been as averse to titles as the House of Representatives.” He was optimistic that the issue had finally been resolved and Adams defeated. Concerning the subject of titles Maclay wrote, “farewell, may I never hear Motion or debate on thee More.”³³

Unfortunately, more motion and debate was exactly what Adams had in mind, and on May 15 Adams opened the day’s session by informing the Senate that a letter had arrived which, he supposed, was intended for him. The letter, he said, had been improperly addressed to “His Excellency, the Vice President.”³⁴ Adams asked the opinion of his fellow senators on what to do with the unfor-

unately titled letter. Many laughed and assumed he was making fun of the recent debacle. Sadly, he was not joking. Adams repeated his plea for advice and asked whether the letter should be read or discarded immediately, unopened. He insisted the matter be put to a vote and vowed to only read the letter with majority approval. The letter was simply an offer by a local printer for the free use of his services, utterly inconsequential. Adams's handling of the letter, however, was not without consequence. Rather than use the letter self-deprecatingly, to relieve some of the hostility that he had engendered, Adams responded with petulance and rigidity. He was bitter and succeeded in exacerbating the damage he already had done to himself.

After this debacle Adams's mood took another plunge. Just days before he had begged Abigail to come to New York immediately, sparing the expense. Now he wrote to tell her things had become even more difficult for him and that he would rather resign his office than bring her to New York to suffer the difficulties he was forced to endure. Adams said he refused to make her as miserable as he was.³⁵

Loss of a friend

Adams's handling of the titles debate alienated not only those who had little previous relationship with the man but one good friend as well. His active defense of titles led Benjamin Rush, one of his oldest friends, to accuse the VP of an inclination toward monarchy and of abandoning the principles to which he espoused at the beginning of the Revolution. "I am as much a republican as I was in 1775" was Adams's reply. Rush accused him of harboring monarchist feelings and said that no true patriot would ever support the dispensing of such grotesque titles. Adams launched into a lengthy and complicated explanation of his true feelings on government, and it was his refusal to totally disavow the notion of a hereditary monarchy that convinced Rush his worst fears had been correct. Adams denied that "there is or ever was in Europe a more free republic than England." He further believed that no "liberty on earth ever equaled English liberty." This statement both enraged and hurt Rush, who felt his trust in Adams as a patriot had been betrayed. Adams's next sentence must have been ignored, which stated his feeling that "admitting absolute monarchy into this country, either in this or the next century, strikes me with horror." Adams had just the plan to prevent such

an occurrence, "A little wisdom at present may preserve a free government in America, I hope forever – certainly for many centuries."³⁶ The little wisdom he was referring to was the use of titles, an argument Rush was not inclined to buy.

He firmly believed the government would endure, hopefully for centuries, free and democratic but would not be able to if matters of respect for authority and proper titles were not settled. "I affirm that they are indispensably necessary to give dignity and energy to government – and on this ground alone I am an advocate for them." He wanted to make clear that he was not doing this for self-aggrandizement "In my private character, I despise them as much at least as any... on earth." He firmly believed such titles ought to be applied to the president and would not back down, even in the face of condemnation from a close friend. "This is my opinion, and I scorn to be hypocrite enough to disguise it."³⁷

Rush responded with yet another indictment on Adams's changed character. He wrote that he was hurt but mostly disappointed by Adams's newfound monarchist tendencies which were the obvious result of support for titles. Adams took exception and shot back, asking, "What would you say or think or feel if your own children, instead of calling you Sir, Father or Pappa, should accost you with the title of 'Ben?'" Rush had declared support of titles not only monarchical and European but bizarre and of little consequence. Adams recognized that "Titles and honors it is true determine nothing, they are vain names and vain ceremony when they are ill placed." However, he continued, "Who does not know the influence they have on the thoughts of men. This is then a more serious affair than it appears at the first glance."³⁸

The fight over titles caused a rift in the friendship of the two men. Rush did not keep his concerns over Adams to himself and instead spread his worries to many of Adams's friends and foes in New York. It was not until after Adams's presidency ended, in 1800, that the two attempted to renew their former friendship, more than 10 years after the fight over titles took place.³⁹ This sad estrangement highlights that Adams's behavior did not only mystify and irritate those who were already inclined to dislike him. Even a friend who knew the sacrifices Adams had made for his country was offended by his actions. If a friend reacted so negatively to Adams's behavior it becomes more understandable why many senators, who had little or no previous relationship with the vice president, were quick to anger.

The fallout

That Adams badly misjudged public opinion is an important commentary on the man, but so is the real concern for the public welfare which motivated the title campaign in the first place. He fought for the inclusion of titles into the newly forming government to the constant irritation of his opponents and the chagrin of his friends. He was unable to end the fight until he had been absolutely defeated, and even then he continued the argument in letters to friends for years to come. He overstepped the bounds of his office in all the wrong ways. He actively engaged his opponents from his seat presiding over the Senate. He gaveled his opponents to silence and declared them out of order when he wanted a chance to speak. He helped those he agreed with and refused to act as the impartial judge he needed to be.⁴⁰ He did this, though, out of an absolute conviction that he was right and that titles were necessary for a stable and strong America. He was determined to do what he felt was right regardless of the cost to his popularity. The fight was not begun for selfish or vain reasons, but the ultimate ugliness of the battle overshadowed his altruistic intentions.

Adams's patronizing lectures to his Senate brethren showed his political insensitivity and fundamental misreading of his role as presiding officer. His friends and foes alike resented the behavior. Adams felt many in the Senate were of lesser importance than himself, and he did little to stifle his condescension. He wrote to tell friends that the Senate was languishing in the grips of ignorance and political cowardice. He said he heard thoughts "upon the subject of government [that] appear to me as extravagant as the drivelings of idiotism or the ravings of delirium."⁴¹ These feelings of contempt that he expressed privately to friends were no doubt written on his face as Adams possessed no ability or desire to disguise them.

The battle over titles made the venerable Adams appear ridiculous. Caustically dismissed as "His Rotundity," Adams was made a mockery of. Congressmen, including the Speaker of the House, openly referred to one another as "Highness of the Senate" or "Highness of the Lower House" to highlight the absurdity of labels.⁴² Adams appeared out of touch and, worst of all, sympathetic to monarchy. His statements required little twisting to be seen as pro-British. While he was most certainly no Anglophile, he also was no Anglophobe. He sought no

creation of an American kingdom but saw no reason to reinvent the wheel. There were many traditions that Adams admired about the English system of government and could not understand why, simply by virtue of being English, they should be discarded.

His political views were manipulated by his enemies, often with his assistance, to mirror those of a blue-blooded British aristocrat. In reality Adams was the son of a farmer, a mildly successful lawyer whose little wealth existed only in his land. Adams was a self-made, hardworking New Englander, not the stuffy noble he was portrayed as. Adams himself thought "a descent from a line of virtuous, independent New England farmers for a hundred and sixty years, was a better foundation than a descent through royal or noble scoundrels."⁴³ Had he been a more capable politician, he might have prevented such accusations from spreading. Unfortunately, he was not, and the picture painted of Adams bore little resemblance to the man he actually was.

His involvement in the fight and the ultimate failure in adopting titles was a body blow to his popularity. The issue was not differentiated from Adams; he had already inextricably linked himself with the issue. To defeat the titles was to defeat Adams. He had tied himself to a sinking ship and, by the end of his first month in office, had sustained a devastating defeat.

At times, Adams realized the damage he had done to himself. A moment of reflection prompted his statement that, "A man must take so much pains to carry little points that seem of no importance." Doing so allowed for the possibility that he would be "despised for a fool by many and not thought very wise by any."⁴⁴ A painful, yet fleeting realization. Adams understood the mistake he had made in this instance but when the next issue arose that he cared deeply about he would again throw himself back into the fray.

Almost unbelievably, Adams continued writing to friends years after the debate over titles ended. One exchange in March 1790, nearly a year after the final postponement, is particularly illuminating. A friend, William Tudor, wrote to warn Adams of the long-term harm his intransigence and tendency to involve himself in Senate debate would cause. Adams was shocked by the advice: "You talk of my enemies but I assure you I have none. I am the enemy of no man living." He obliviously claimed not to have "intentionally offended any man, and I know not that I have actually offended any." He believed he had "never given my sentiments at large upon any question but once." This one occa-

sion was the dispute over titles and even then, "I asked leave, and it was granted seemingly with pleasure." Adams's propensity for delusion appears in his next statement: "At other times I have only occasionally asked a question or made a single observation and that but seldom." Sulking, he now vowed that if these actions are perceived as faults then they are easily remedied, "for I have no desire ever to open my mouth again upon any question."⁴⁵ If only it were true.

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