

A Warm Bucket of Spit: Personality and the Vice Presidency

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After careful consideration I have narrowed my topic to a subject that Vice President John Nance Garner referred to as not being worth “a warm bucket of spit.” Though his description is graphic, Garner’s frustration is easily understood. The office is briefly if ambiguously mentioned in the Constitution, devoid of political or legal authority and largely ignored by both the public and the Washington political establishment. Yet, the office has on several occasions been critically important. The vice presidency has received little attention relative to the potential historical and political importance of the office. I will work to rectify this and will explore how the vice presidency has evolved and to what degree the personality of the men in office at times of great change have affected the path that evolution took.

With regard to the office of the vice presidency the constitution was vague, obscure and evasive. Everything about the office was open to interpretation and a unique opportunity existed for its first occupant to effect great change. While John Adams may not have written a script his predecessors would be doomed to recite, his actions demarcated the borders of the stage on which they would perform.

To begin, one must understand how mismatched Adams was with the vice presidential job description. Adams wanted to lead debate, not preside over it. He wanted to shape the agenda, not watch as others did the shaping. The vice president needed to be a listener, but Adams wanted to be listened to. He was called on to be a spectator of events that were crucial to the future of the country, something that worked against his every natural instinct to inform and lead others. Adams ultimately lacked the self-restraint needed to effectively perform such a role, and the vice presidency became a kind of purgatory for him.

Adams’s personality and resulting behavior may have forever changed the way vice presidents interact with their peers in government. Had someone less inclined to alienate his contemporaries been the first VP the position may not have been quite so relegated to the fringes of power in Washington.

The significance of Adams’s disposition is seen by examining several events that occurred during his tenure. The first is the election of 1788 and the behind-the-scenes politicking of Alexander Hamilton (Smith, 732-742). Hamilton concocted an elaborate system that, at least initially, was meant to ensure George Washington won the presidency unanimously and that Adams came in second place (Hamilton, 247). Hamilton, however, was overzealous in his effort to secure such an outcome and, after deciding Adams would be uncooperative with his plans for Federalist

domination, set about whittling away his electoral votes (Hamilton, 249). He wanted a weakened vice president and that is exactly what he got. More than a few votes were siphoned away to other candidates and Adams was elected with less than half the electoral votes of Washington, a tremendous embarrassment. Adams was hurt and bitter but refused to believe Hamilton was behind the machinations, even as friends implored him to face facts.

The second revolved around the seemingly unimportant issue of 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” (Maclay, 40). 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 (Maclay, 42). Adams was savaged in the press, derided in the Senate and denounced by one of his oldest and closest friends (Adams, July 5, 1789). 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.

These problems alone would have been enough to overwhelm Adams’s vice presidency but were compounded by the political battle lines being drawn around him. As he assumed office and set to the task of organizing the new nation, the country’s first political factions were being formed. Adams loathed political division and feared dissension in so young a country would quickly bring about its destruction (Adams, March 17, 1797). Adams’s political inexperience was magnified by the acumen of the leaders of these factions, Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson. Hamilton was strategic and an inexhaustible organizer for the Federalists. Jefferson was masterful at appearing disengaged while simultaneously bankrolling Democratic hatchet men across the country (Jefferson, 300). The two were brilliant politicians and well matched adversaries. Unfortunately, Adams was tasked to lead a body over which both men struggled for control. Jefferson had his Democrats, Hamilton his Federalists, Washington was unassailable and Adams was everyone’s whipping boy. The wagons were circled and Adams was left alone.

The implications of Adams’s political isolation are essential to understanding the future direction the office would take. He was unable to shore up any power for the office outside of what little the constitution mandated. Therefore, any power exerted by future VPs would have to be of their own making; little, if any, inherent power would be acquired by virtue of being vice president since Adams was too marginalized to capture any of his own. Adams’s problems did not eliminate the possibility of influential vice presidents, but his own powerlessness gave his followers little room to work with. Future VPs would forever be on a short leash because of Adams’s inability to break free from the start. If someone like Jefferson had been first, and the political maneuverings of a party had been

centralized in the vice president's office, the horizons for his predecessors would have been significantly more expansive than those forged by Adams.

In 1848, when Daniel Webster was offered the vice presidency on the Whig ticket, he declined saying, "I do not propose to be buried until I am dead" (Baumgartner, 3). I imagine that, in retrospect, Adams would have wholeheartedly agreed. During his time in office he was called a British-loving monarchist and was referred to in a popular poem as "the first spawn of hell" (Smith, 778). He was threatened with a duel by Pierce Butler, a Senator from South Carolina and a member of the body over which Adams presided. He alienated many, was ignored by almost all and left office less popular than when he had entered. I believe it would be fair to say that Adams would have considered John Nance Garner's statement that the vice presidency was not worth "a warm bucket of spit" a colossal understatement. To have a man who was so unhappy, so maligned, as the first vice president, who would serve as the example that others would follow – even if not consciously – affected the course the office would ultimately take. Adams's personality, for lack of a better word, deserves a share of the credit for the evolution of the vice presidency.

The Founders' (blurry) vision

Reading through James Madison's notes of the Philadelphia Constitutional Convention, one is struck that the vice presidency is only discussed on three days, September 4, 6, and 7, out of a convention that stretched from May 14 to September 17, 1787 (Madison). Once discussion was underway it became clear that the vice president's constitutional mandate vested him with only two responsibilities: presiding over the deliberations of the Senate and standing by to succeed the President in the event of his death or disability. An official member of the executive branch with leadership over part of the legislative branch, this duality speaks to the fact the functions of the office were secondary to the reason for its creation. The office originated as little more than a reluctant afterthought. The vice presidency was created to remedy the far more important problem plaguing the delegates: how to elect a president.

When the authors of the Constitution gathered in May of 1787 to forge a new government, the office of the vice presidency was far from the minds' of all. The notion of such a position was initially floated in June by Alexander Hamilton. He mentioned it casually, not in a formal proposal to the Constitutional Convention but in a speech in which he outlined his plan for the new government (Relyea, 13). The long speech covered many topics; he discussed the three branches of government, the duties that should be distributed among them, terms of office, and his belief in federalism. Out of this much larger speech one proposal was made that hinted at the vice presidency that was to come: "On the death, resignation or removal of the Governour [president] his authorities to be exercised by the President of the Senate till a Successor be appointed" (Madison, 148). Hamilton believed that the person who ought to succeed the president was to be from the legislative branch. Hamilton felt that only in the event the president was unable to

serve would the VP move into, and lead, the executive branch and then only until such time as the president could resume the office or be replaced by some unspecified procedure (Witcover, 12).

The vice presidency only emerged because it offered a solution to how best to elect a president. Debate had gone on for weeks over the exact structure and powers that should be granted to the executive branch. Once it was decided that executive power be entrusted to a single officer, eventually called a “president,” the debate moved to how he would be chosen (Bowen, 57). Presidential selection became a major stumbling block in the final month of the Convention. Delegates needed to find a way to select the leader of the executive branch that would avoid undue influence on the part of the legislative branch, any one state, or collusion among any group of states (Baumgartner, 8). In these discussions, the notion of a vice president entered not at all, yet establishment of the position depended upon them.

The compromise that eventually developed not only settled the issue of presidential selection, but resulted in the creation of the vice presidency. This approach was first suggested by Wilson and consisted of special presidential electors in each state equal in number to the total congressional membership. The electors would be chosen by means devised by each state legislature. However, the Electoral College system, as it came to be called, had an obvious pitfall: the problem of the favorite son (Baumgartner, 9). A majority vote would be required to elect a president, and if each state voted for their favorite son, as many delegates feared they would, there would be no winner. Every election would have the potential for deadlock and would require the invention of yet another method to break this tie. Beyond simple irritation, an electoral system that resulted in stalemate would breed uncertainty, the last thing an emerging nation needs. The president of a new nation needs an irrefutable mandate to maintain the citizenry’s faith in his leadership.

The way around this problem was soon suggested. Instead of casting one vote for president, each elector would get two, one of which would be required to go to an individual not of the same state as the elector (Baumgartner, 12). Article II, Section I of the Constitution states: “The Electors shall meet in their respective States, and vote by Ballot for two persons, of whom one at least shall not lie an Inhabitant of the same State with themselves.” This would minimize the risk of deadlock and was sufficient to persuade most delegates to embrace the compromise.

By reading Madison’s notes from September 4, 1787 it becomes apparent that only as an aside did the Convention then turn its attention towards the possibility of a vice president. Once the more important problem of presidential election had been solved the question became what to do with all the other votes cast, the ones for the losers. It was decided that, “in every case after the choice of the President, the person having the greatest number of votes of the Electors shall be the vice-president” (Madison, 310).

One important conclusion that should be made at this point concerns the Founders’ feelings toward the man who would be second-in-command. The

intention was for the person chosen second to be esteemed equally with the man chosen first. Each elector was required to cast two votes for president, not one for president and one for vice. The person that came in second was assumed to be capable, qualified, and respected second only to the president (Witcover, 18).

Despite the esteem most delegates felt was owed to the man who would become vice president, most held the office of the vice presidency itself in very low regard. North Carolina's Hugh Williamson observed about the vice presidency: "It was introduced only for the sake of a valuable mode of election which required two be chosen at the same time." The role of the vice president appeared to many as make-work. Madison's notes on September 7 succinctly convey Williamson's view of the office, he "observed that such an officer as vice-President was not wanted" (Madison, 312). Others argued that if such an office was to be created then it should most surely not be a paid position. The First Congress debated whether or not the vice president should receive a salary, some advocating that he only receive a per diem for the days he presided over the Senate (Baumgartner, 9). John Adams's salary as the first vice president was set at \$5,000, one-fifth of the president's. One senator protested that even this amount was excessive. His argument was that nowhere was it written that the vice president actually had to come to work (Grant, 350).

Other objections to the office emerged: "Mr. Gorham disapproved of making the next highest after the President, the vice-President, without referring the decision to the Senate in case the next highest should have less than a majority of votes." The problem was that while the vice president would have the second highest amount of votes, that number could be very small and potentially place a person in office with only minimal popular support. Nathaniel Gorham was rightfully concerned that, "as the regulation stands a very obscure man with very few votes may arrive at that appointment" (Madison, 306). A Maryland delegate, Luther Martin, echoes this concern, though with more disdain. Martin sarcastically referred to the vice president in his letters as, "that great officer of government." He warned that because no majority vote was required for his election, "it is very possible, and not improbable, that he may be appointed by the electors of a single large state..." Martin sought to wash his hands of the situation and wrote that, "Every part of the system which relates to the Vice President, as well as the present mode of electing the President, was introduced and agreed upon after I left Philadelphia" (Madison, 307). Delegates desperately dodging culpability in its creation did little to encourage respect for the office.

Returning to Hamilton's original proposal, one issue that had not yet been resolved was who would become the presiding officer of the Senate. Hamilton hoped the President of the Senate would be made vice president and take over the presidency in a crisis. This sparked concern that the Senate would wield too much influence in presidential succession if a Senator was to move into executive leadership following presidential disability. Other objections were raised about having an elected Senator as presiding officer of the body (Baumgartner, 11). This would mean depriving the state from whence he came a vote on all occasions other

than a tie. No state was eager to forfeit half their senatorial delegation for the privilege of wielding a gavel.

An elected vice president provided a convenient remedy for both of these problems. The Convention seized upon the idea and decided the vice president would be made President of the Senate and given a vote only in the case of a tie. But the problem of a member of the executive branch serving simultaneously in the legislative branch raised a basic question about separation of powers. George Mason of Virginia protested the decision and felt making the vice president an officer in the Senate would give too much power to the organization. He considered it “that unnecessary (and dangerous) officer, the Vice President, who for want of other employment is made President of the Senate.” This was not a benign problem. Mason felt it resulted in “dangerously blending the executive and legislative power” (Witcover, 16). These objections, along with many others, would prove serious enough that Mason would ultimately refuse to sign the final draft of the Constitution.

Others rushed to defend the placement of a member of the executive branch in the legislative branch as the only sensible solution to a complex problem. Hamilton, whose idea it was to begin with, observed in “The Federalist No. 68”:

The appointment of an extraordinary person, as Vice-President, has been objected to as superfluous, if not mischievous. It has been alleged, that it would have been preferable to have authorized the Senate to elect out of their own body an officer answering that description. But two considerations seem to justify the ideas of the convention in this respect. One is, that to secure at all times the possibility of a definite resolution of the body, it is necessary that the President should have only a casting vote. And to take the senator of any State from his seat as senator, to place him in that of President of the Senate, would be to exchange, in regard to the State from which he came, a constant for a contingent vote (Hamilton, 332).

Hamilton believed that such an appointment was absolutely necessary and utterly appropriate.

Ultimately, objections were heard but quickly pushed aside. After all, the Convention was winding down, the delegates had been gathered for four months at this point, and final language had to be worked out so that a constitution could be written. The objections were lost in the shuffle of creating a new government. Besides, as another delegate observed, “If the vice-President were not to be President of the Senate, he would be without employment” (Madison, 314). This goes back to the central problem of a make-work vice presidency; they had to find something for him to do, even if that meant a little violation of the separation of powers.

When it became clear the vice presidency was there to stay, it seems logical that the Convention would then turn its full attention towards the issue of succession. Unfortunately, this did not occur. Delegates were more interested in

fleshing out the vice president's role in the Senate than in the potentially more critical matter of replacing a fallen president. The issue was discussed, but only appears in the notes as one of several topics on only one day.

The Committee on Style was presented with two different proposals concerning the exact wording of the section on presidential succession. Told to combine them into one, the result was Article II, Section 1 of the Constitution:

In case of the removal of the President from office, or of his death, resignation or inability to discharge the powers and duties of the said office, the same shall devolve upon the Vice President, and the Congress may by law provide for the Case of Removal, Death, Resignation, or Inability, both of the President and Vice President, declaring what Officer shall then act as President, and such officer shall act accordingly, until the Disability be removed, or a President shall be elected.

Two ambiguities arise from this carelessly drawn language. First, did the delegates intend for "the powers and duties" to devolve to the *person* of the vice president or the *office*? This distinction is critical to understanding the purpose of the passage. If the latter, the vice president would only be acting president. If the former, then he would be president. Second, does the phrase "until the Disability be removed, or a President shall be elected" imply a special election should be held or does it mean the vice president will serve the remainder of his elected term (Baumgartner, 12)?

According to Madison, the founders initially proposed that in the event of the death of a president the vice president would serve only as "acting" president "until another President be chosen," suggesting that only the powers and duties of the office would devolve on him temporarily, not the office itself (Witcover, 17). However, this language was dropped by the Committee on Style. The matter remained unresolved until the first implementation of the clause fifty-four years later, when the decisiveness of the vice president, John Tyler upon the sudden death of President William Henry Harrison mooted any further discussion of the matter.

The vice presidency is something of a constitutional hybrid, an oddity in a system carefully crafted to separate the functions and powers of the various branches of government. The Founding Fathers created an office that many felt was electorally necessary but functionally irrelevant. The political no-man's-land created by the Founders within which the vice presidency operates has shaped the history of the office for better or worse ever since.

Tussle over titles

From the very beginning of the first Congress of the United States, on April 23, 1789, the Senate was consumed by an issue that would do immense and lasting political harm to 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.

As for what specifically the chief executive should be called, Adams had a few thoughts. One he clearly did not like was president. 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. "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" (Adams, May 3, 1789). This suggestion did not last long and upon further reflection he concluded that "Highness was not high enough" (Adams, June 26, 1789). He now believed "representatives in the executive authority," and by this he meant Washington and himself, should be given "the title of Majesty" (Adams, June 28, 1789). 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.

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 (Adams, April 20, 1789). He began with a lengthy speech trumpeting the merits of titles and providing historical support for his position reaching back to the ancient Romans (Maclay, 22). 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” (Maclay, 5).

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” (Maclay, 23). 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” (Maclay, 29). While Adams himself did not propose the title, it was the committee’s recommendation. The members had been handpicked 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 (Jefferson, 315). 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” (Jefferson, 316).

Several days later the issue reemerged. 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” (Maclay, 31). Morris now regretted the decision.

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” (Adams, May 14, 1789). 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.

Unfortunately, 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” (Maclay, 40). Adams asked the opinion of his fellow senators on what to do with the unfortunately titled letter. Many laughed and assumed he was making fun of the recent debacle. Sadly, he was not. 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.

Jefferson and Hamilton: Founding Fathers of Faction

Adams’s time in office cannot be fully understood without discussing the development of these political parties. From the time of the Constitutional Convention and the heated disputes that occurred there regarding the scale and scope of the emerging national government, it became clear that not everyone agreed on the proper course the country should follow. Compromise was reached on many of these issues and the new government of George Washington enjoyed a brief honeymoon period. This quickly came to an end as important issues arose whose outcomes would dramatically affect the direction the country would take. These disagreements over specific issues recurred more and more frequently and generally stuck to a recurring theme: those that favored a powerful, active federal government versus those that did not. Ideologically based groups began to coalesce into the Federalists and Anti-Federalists (later known as the Democratic-Republicans) and within a matter of years America’s first attempt at political partisanship was up and running.

The leaders of these groups were both occupants of Washington’s cabinet: The Federalist, Secretary of the Treasury Hamilton and the Republican, Secretary of State Jefferson. Jefferson had considerable aid in his leadership of the group with Hamilton’s former ally and influential House member, James Madison. These men had fundamental disagreements regarding what course the new nation should take. Each firmly believed their way was the only acceptable option and that the opposition would set the country on the path towards ruination. Many attempts were made to head off a complete war between the factions, including President Washington’s much repeated refrain for compromise and cooperation.

Adams’s role in this affair is of special import. Like Washington and many others, Adams had become increasingly distraught over the rise of political divisiveness, the forming of parties or factions. That political parties were an evil that could bring the ruination of republican government was doctrine he, along with many others, had long accepted. “There is nothing I dread so much as division of the Republic into two great parties, each arranged under its leader and converting measures in opposition to each other,” Adams had observed to a correspondent

while at Amsterdam, before the Revolution ended. Yet this was exactly what had happened. The “turbulent maneuvers” of factions, he now wrote privately, could “tie the hands and destroy the influence” of every honest man with a desire to serve the public good. There was “division of sentiments over everything,” he told his son-in-law. “How few aim at the good of the whole, without aiming too much at the prosperity of parts” (McCullough, 422)!

Adams was certainly sympathetic to the Federalist position. He believed in a powerful federal government and in powerful and respected national leaders, as the debacle over titles painfully indicated. He believed the new nation needed a strong central government to hold itself together and resist the centrifugal forces that were seeking to pull it apart. Adams fought for the expansion of executive power and for increased Presidential power in hiring and firing members of administration.

In other respects, though, Adams was suspicious of the Federalist agenda. He was suspicious of the economic vision for America championed by Hamilton. Adams was the proud son of a farmer and though he was a Harvard educated lawyer, he always saw himself as a simple farmer. He cherished the hard driving Puritan work ethic that was typical of many New Englanders. He saw farming and the agricultural vision for the nation advocated by Jefferson as honest and essential to creating and sustaining a self-sufficient nation. While he was an educated professional, Adams was never wealthy. His money existed in acres, not dollars, and he was deeply suspicious of bankers, financial schemes and what he saw as the unmitigated power of the wealthy. Hamilton’s desire to build a country of factories instead of farms never sat well with the Vice President.

Adams also loathed the method of Hamilton’s political process. He loathed the destructive politics that both parties embraced and never engaged in or approved of the political maneuvers employed by either side. Adams fought passionately for individual issues that he felt were important, but did not simplify these issues into one Federalist ideological slate, lock, stock and barrel. Adams never contributed money to the partisan press and passionately hated most newspapermen. His own experience as a favorite victim no doubt colored this disgust for he always saw the press simpleminded purveyors of gossip and lies.

What vexed Adams most was his former friend Jefferson’s “blind spirit of party” (McCullough, 443). In theory, Jefferson deplored parties or faction no less than did Adams. In practice, however, he was proving remarkably adept at party politics and remarkably hypocritical to Adams. As always, he avoided open dispute, debate, controversy, or any kind of confrontation, but behind the scenes he was unrelenting and extremely effective. To Jefferson it was a matter of necessity, given his hatred of Hamilton and all that was riding on what decisions were being made now and the effect they would have on the nation’s future. To Adams, Jefferson had become a fanatic.

And all the rest...

Ultimately, the story of John Adams’s vice presidency is not one of immense failure. He was never totally isolated, never utterly friendless, never

completely defeated. He just wasn't as successful as others. His story is instead one of unrealized potential. In those first years following the Constitutional Convention a short window of time existed where job responsibilities and power were in a constant state of flux. The delegates in Philadelphia had purposely created a broad framework for government and relied on the first inhabitants to sort out the details. In this window of time much unclaimed power existed and a free-for-all ensued to see who could capture it and, in so doing, expand not only their personal influence but set precedents for their successors to follow. Adams's "failure" was not in reducing the scope of his office but in not engaging in the struggle. Consequently, the vice presidency missed this crucial moment when the duties and powers of jobs were still fluid and was not able to build upon its constitutionally prescribed foundation. Rather than provide future vice presidents a precedent of active engagement with the political process, Adams ended up lost in the shuffle. He created the baseline future vice presidents would operate from, and, had a man more politically inclined occupied the office first, that baseline might have been higher. Politics is a contact sport and for a variety of reasons Adams was unable to suit up.

While some instances recounted in this paper may lead readers to assume that the Adams never seized this power due only to his own incompetence. This only tells part of the story. His hatred of party politics was another factor in his lack of success. The lack of attention paid to the office by delegates at the Constitutional Convention and the resulting structural problems of the office offers another explanation for the outcome of his tenure. The development of factions and the eventual split of the nation into ideologically opposed parties is another. A changing national mood away from the British ways embraced by Adams towards all things French and "republican" was yet another stone around Adams's neck. No event, especially not something as complicated as the evolution of a major governmental office, can be simplified to having only one cause.

Some occurrences, particularly the episode over titles, leave the distinct impression that Adams was a buffoon. He comes off as an insufferable gasbag, inept and adrift in a sea of politics. While at times this was true, he was so much more. Detailing every time Adams was kind to a friend or loyal to his country or resolute in his principles would not fit well with the larger message of my paper and yet I would hate to leave the reader with the wrong impression of a man I very much admire. In many ways Adams's greatest flaws as a politician were his most admirable traits as a man. Adams's lack of the traits that made Hamilton and Jefferson political savants, in my opinion, made him all the more likeable. He was easily outfoxed because he lacked guile. He lost legislative disputes because he was not calculating. He put his foot in his mouth because he was blunt. He made enemies because he told the truth, even when it was politically inconvenient to do so. When the instinct for self-preservation would force most people to abandon their unpopular opinions Adams kept on fighting because he believed that what he was doing was right. Even his harshest critics recognized Adams did not take the job for his own aggrandizement; he believed public service was the duty of all

honest men. In a letter to his son Thomas, Adams offered this warning: “Public business, my son, must always be done by somebody. If wise men decline it, others will not; if honest men refuse it, others will not.” Public service should not be motivated by personal gain and advised his son that goal of any politician “should be to place his honor out of reach of all men” (McCullough, 415). Like all those who deal in history, writers are charged with interpreting events as best they are able. I see Adams as simultaneously great and flawed, ultimately likeable thanks to his irrepressible passion. Adams had his moments of buffoonery but in the end was a man of integrity.

Adams’s impact on the office of the vice presidency is more fully understood by examining Thomas Jefferson’s tenure as the second vice president. When Jefferson took office in 1796 he was unmistakably the leader of the Republicans. As such he was philosophically opposed to a powerful, active federal government and had repeatedly sought its limitation. Jefferson wanted the states, especially his beloved Virginia, to have the power in the emerging country. It did not bode well then that the nation’s second vice president saw the national government and his office as an affront to the principles of Republicanism. He was so unhappy with the political situation in Philadelphia that he left soon after his inauguration and returned to Monticello where he would stay for much of his vice presidency, seeing to construction. A vice president seldom in the capitol city was not a sign of good things to come for the office (Ferling, 125).

Jefferson, despite his protestations to the contrary, did not retire to a life of leisure in the countryside. Though he was many miles away from Philadelphia he remained very much in the thick of things politically. While he may not have wanted the federal government or his office to be of any importance, he certainly wanted to keep himself as influential as ever. Jefferson, and his political confidant Madison, saw to it he still pulled the party strings from Monticello. Jefferson relied on Madison, the Republicans in Congress, his network of newspapermen along with his gang of fellow aristocratic Virginia planters to ensure he remained a force. On several occasions he personally intervened in disputes to tip the balance of the scales in favor of the Republicans. In each instance he pulled the levers of power to derail or disrupt the work of Adams and Hamilton’s Federalists. These actions paint a picture of an active vice president more than capable of expanding his office.

But Jefferson’s many exercises of power, his usurpations of Adams, his obstruction of Hamilton were not done as the vice president, they were not done *through* the vice presidency. The vice presidency and his role as vice president were incidental to his power. He was the leader of one of the two political parties in the country. He had numerous personal contacts, loyal political operatives, friends in the legislature and a partisan press to do his bidding for him. None of these groups came with the vice presidency, none were achieved by being vice president and none were conditional on his continuing in that position. He relied on a network of allies that existed for years prior to his becoming vice president. He did not need what little, if any, influence the vice presidency had to achieve his ends.

The Constitutional Convention only created the vice presidency to serve as an easy solution to an electoral problem. Little time was spent fleshing out exactly what the office would look like and what powers its occupants would possess. Such problems were left to the office's first inhabitant. It just so happened that the first inhabitant was a man who, by his own admission, was ill-suited for the job.

This weakness was exacerbated by the growing strength of those around him. Hamilton and Jefferson formed parties and decided issues of immense import for the future of the country. Adams, refusing to take sides, was caught in the middle. Decisions were made without input from the vice president at all. The assumption of state debts, the permanent location of the capital, the creation of a national bank, the handling of Whiskey Rebellion were issues where the opinion of Adams was not solicited. Then Jefferson takes over and, while he was incredibly powerful as vice president, that power had little or nothing to do with the office.

In the end, my argument boils down, not to a warm bucket of spit, but to a bucket of wet concrete. The intentional vagueness of the Constitution left a largely blank slate, a bucket of wet concrete, with which the first occupant, Adams, was empowered to build with it what he may. Adams let the bucket sit and dry. If, by the end of his eight years in office, the bucket had not yet hardened, Jefferson, a man philosophically opposed to doing anything with the concrete, next took the reins. The office sat unexpanded for twelve years and the outlines of the office became etched into the political landscape of the country. The power that had existed at the beginning of the country had been claimed. Every other office had seized its piece of the pie and, after twelve years, little remained.

There have since been many powerful vice presidents and there will likely be more. But these vice presidents' power is in spite of Adams and, to an extent, Jefferson, not because of them. The power they have seized for themselves has come from their own brilliance, fame or friendly relationship with their president. Little is transmitted to them by simply assuming office and this is where Adam's personality played a part. His lack of success in expanding the office while the opportunity existed impacts the power of vice presidents today. This is where the effects of his behavior can be seen in the long-term. I must respectfully disagree with Vice President Garner's assessment of the vice presidency. I do not see the office as a warm bucket of spit. I see it instead as a bucket of dried concrete.

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