

# Lesson Thirty-Nine

## John Adams

### LESSON IDEA

To show the qualities of character and acts of statesmanship which made John Adams a great American.

### PREPARATION

Borrow one of the following books from your local library for the project suggested in "During The Week": *John Adams* by John T. Morse, Jr., *John Adams* by Anne Burleigh, or *John Adams* by Page Smith.

**T**HE YEAR was 1781. At Yorktown, Virginia, the British General Cornwallis had surrendered to American Commander-in-Chief George Washington. The War for Independence had been won, the British defeated, and a new nation established! Or so most Americans thought.

It was true that the war of fife, drum, musket, and cannon was over. Yet the fruits of victory could still be squandered by terms of the treaty yet to be signed. America remained surrounded by potentially hostile adversaries. Spain controlled much of the Mississippi on her western frontier, and an important piece of property (Florida) to the south. England still dominated the ocean on the east. And both France and England commanded forts and controlled waterways in the west and in Canada.

It was clearly possible that, in the wake of military victory over England, the newly united states could nevertheless have their hard won independence stripped away by the ambitious and quarrelsome nations that still surrounded them. The eventual outcome would largely depend on the post-war pact to be signed with England.

Can you think of any wars that the United States has won on the battlefield yet lost in subsequent treaty negotiations? [World War II is a revealing example battlefield victory lost at the conference

table. The supposed reason for fighting was to secure freedom for nations such as Poland, yet shortly after the allied "victory," Poland and most other countries of Eastern Europe were surrendered to Soviet tyranny. They had been rescued from the Nazi threat only to be delivered to the burgeoning communist empire by our treaty-makers.]

The defeat of Cornwallis at Yorktown in 1781 was not the end of the struggle for independence, but rather a new beginning. The American treaty-makers had to safeguard the battlefield triumph. The Continental Congress had assigned some of its ablest men to protect the new nation's interests in negotiations, including Benjamin Franklin, John Jay, and Arthur Lee. But the one who

proved to be the most astute and successful of them all was Massachusetts statesman John Adams.

Adams appeared to have few attributes of the diplomats of the day. In the European tradition, diplomacy was viewed as an intricate and duplicitous game played by those most adept at social grace, political intrigue, and saying one thing while intending another. John Adams seemed peculiarly unqualified for the role. He was restless and outspoken by temperament, eager to push forward with the business at hand, and hopelessly incapable of

concealing his true motives and honestly held opinions.

It was not difficult for sophisticated politicians to read Adams' mind, but it quickly became evident to them that he could not be bullied, outmaneuvered, or bribed. He was shrewd at assessing character and had a sharp mind finely honed by a deep understanding of history and law. Arriving in Europe as the representative of a financially exhausted infant nation of loosely united colonies,



John Adams

### FOR SERIOUS STUDENTS

John Adams was a statesman, not a mere politician. He was denied a second term as President due to underhanded maneuvers by members of his own cabinet. It was during his Administration that the first divisive political parties began to form. Among the forces encouraging this division were conspiratorial organizations that had been established in America to spread the subversive agenda of the French Revolution. A simplified yet accurate account of these events may be found in *John Adams*, by John T. Morse, Jr. (especially chapters 10-12).

his dignified and confident bearing gave the impression that he represented one of the world's great powers. Biographer John T. Morse describes his diplomatic acumen in these words:

Had the business of the colonies been conducted by a diplomatist of the European school ... endeavoring to meet art with wiles, and diplomatic lies with professional falsehood, valuable time would surely have been lost, and smaller advantages would probably have been gained; but Adams strode along stoutly, in broad daylight, breaking the snares which were set for his feet, shouldering aside those who sought to crowd him from his path, unceremonious, making direct for his goal, with his eyes wide open and his tongue not silent to speak the plain truth. Certainly this trans-Atlantic negotiator excited surprise by his ... untraditional conduct among the ministers and envoys of the European cabinets; but in the end he proved too much for them all; their peculiar skill was of no avail against his novel and original tactics: their covert indirection would not stand before his blunt directness. So he carried his points with brilliant success.

Under Adams' leadership, the United States wrested from England each of the concessions it most wanted, and which the British least wanted to give. Boundary lines were drawn in the Americans' favor. All that England could reasonably be asked to grant concerning navigation on the Mississippi River was agreed to. A British demand that all Tories and loyalists be reimbursed for their losses during the war whittled

down to a meaningless stipulation that Congress would use its influence with the states to minimize legal obstacles in the collection of debts. Fishing rights off the eastern coast, which were crucial to the economy New England (but also coveted by Britain and France), were granted to the Americans. And perhaps most important of all, England's negotiators agreed to recognize the new nation as just that — a full-fledged nation, not merely 13 disobedient colonies.

**T**HE PERSISTENCE AND BOLDNESS that characterized his efforts to win the treaty-making battle had enabled Adams score an earlier victory in the critical area of area of finance. During the war, money was desperately needed to equip the Continental Army. France had partially answered the American plea for help, but more was needed. Adams was convinced, however, that the additional funds should come from another source, lest the colonies become so obligated to France that they could be compelled to bow to French demands after the war. There was the very real prospect of losing independence by becoming little more than a puppet of Paris, and thereafter being dragged into endless European wars and intrigues.

After carefully analyzing the situation from his diplomatic post in France, Adams decided to approach the bankers and moneylenders of Holland. He sought to be received as the American minister, which would have meant diplomatic recognition of the United States and the opening of doors to loans and trade agreements between the two countries. But as he began his tour of the Netherlands in 1780, he ran into a wall of ignorance and indifference. Few of his hosts seemed to know or care about the existing plight, or potential prosperity and trade potential, of the new American nation.

How do you suppose Adams reacted to the dilemma? What would you have done? [Ask everyone for an opinion.]

As usual, Adams' dedication to his country and her needs overruled his personal pride and impatience. He had a goal in mind, and he intended to work toward it with all of the energy and ability at his command. The most viable solution seemed ominous: he would have to become a combination journalist, teacher, and writer — a one-man edu-

