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John Quincy Adams and Slavery: Revealing the Founders' Contradiction

The compromises established between the states in the Constitution formed the key bonds of the Union. However, the widening of conflicting interests ultimately escalated to war. Tension between the states in the decades before the Civil War centered on conflicting rights, political interest, and morality. In the 1830s and 1840s all these issues combined into an ideological boiling point over the root issue: slavery. Before war was even in question, Americans and their representatives in Congress fought a battle of rights which culminated in the efforts of the one man who linked the American founding with their own generation. John Quincy Adams became the main voice of a storm of abolitionist petitions during his final years of public service in the House of Representatives. Adams's convictions clashed with his commitment to the Union in a conflict which revealed the contradiction at the heart of the Constitution. His transition from personal and cautionary objection to outspoken representation of abolitionists indicated the increasing divide in America over the founding dilemma of slavery. As the controversy unfolded, it revealed the depth of the Constitutional, political, emotional, and moral disparity between the states and their citizens.

John Quincy Adams, as a son of John and Abigail Adams, was a son of the American Revolution and a living connection to the founders' cautionary view of the abolition of slavery. His service in public offices spanned more than the first sixty years of the new nation, and he was the only son of the revolutionary leaders who continued a prominent life of public service

for republican ideals.¹ When the French traveler Alexis de Tocqueville recorded his discussions with Adams, Tocqueville noted Adams's belief that slavery corrupted the South and his fear for the danger slavery posed to the Union.² The conflict in views established in the nation's founding had been best reflected in Thomas Jefferson's dilemma with slavery. The slaveholding founder had also expressed a belief in the corruption and danger inherent in slavery as well as an opposition to slavery in principle.³ Adams expressed the same mixture of disgust over slavery and caution against its abolition. In his personal journal entries on the Missouri Compromise, he reflected that "slavery is the great and foul stain upon the North American Union, and it is a contemplation worthy of the most exalted soul whether its total abolition is or is not practicable."⁴ Yet, like the founders, he hoped for the removal of slavery. Weeks earlier, he expressed a heartfelt desire that someone would rise to speak with more eloquence, heart, and genius and expose slavery as the "outrage against the goodness of God" that it was.⁵ Adams himself later became known in Congress for his eloquence and genius on the subject of slavery.

In Adams's rise to fame as the voice on slavery, he exhibited the same mixture of caution and passion inherited from the founding. Though he never knew the same personal struggle with slavery as Jefferson, Adams shared in the dilemma as a public servant committed to the compromises built into the Constitution.⁶ Adams's first act in the House of Representatives in 1831 was to present a petition from citizens of Pennsylvania for the abolition of slavery in the

¹ William Lee Miller, *Arguing About Slavery: the Great Battle in the United States Congress*, 1st Edition. (New York: A.A. Knop, 1996), 153.

² Lynn H Parsons, *John Quincy Adams* (Madison, WI: Madison House, 1998), 222-223.

³ Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on Virginia, Queries 14 and 18* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1964), 155.

⁴ John Quincy Adams, *Diary of John Quincy Adams* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1981), 228-229.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 226.

⁶ Parsons, *John Quincy Adams*, 223-224.

District of Columbia.⁷ He actually introduced the petition by qualifying that he did not personally support the petition. He feared putting pressure on the slavery issue too early and encouraging dangerous division in the Union.⁸ This was not uncommon. Petitions were a part of Congressional routine, and avoiding conflicts of interest had made it common practice to send them politely but directly into parliamentary oblivion.⁹ In his own personal reflections, Adams revealed the depth of this conviction. He believed that to secure abolition would require the dissolution of the Union, hopefully followed by a remaking of its principles.¹⁰ The debates that ensued when these petitions were no longer politely forgotten called into question not only the Constitutional power of Congress over slavery but the very stability of the Union.¹¹ The bond between the states was the principles of the document, an agreement that included the contradiction of slavery.¹² Challenges to the compromise challenged the agreement itself. Adams called this the “rotteness of the heart of our Union”, a compromise of principle for the cause of political expediency.¹³

The transition into controversy occurred when the House adopted a new policy toward slavery petitions, and its consequences led Adams to abandon his previous caution. The problem began when John Fairfield of New York presented yet another routine petition on slavery in 1835, but this time the opposition motioned to table it immediately without printing, in essence

⁷ William Henry Seward, *Life and Public Services of John Quincy Adams, Sixth President of the United States: With the Eulogy Delivered Before the Legislature of New York* (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 2007), 269. Petitioning for abolition in D.C. was common due to the direct jurisdiction of Congress over the district.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 270-271.

⁹ Miller, *Arguing About Slavery*, 27-29. Petitions on slavery were routinely assigned to a committee and eventually left unresolved.

¹⁰ John Quincy Adams, *Diary*, 229.

¹¹ Seward, *Life and Public Services of John Quincy Adams*, 290. Miller, *Arguing About Slavery*, 35.

¹² Miller, *Arguing About Slavery*, 16-17, 23.

¹³ Quoted in Parsons, *John Quincy Adams*, 223. The debate in Congress that Parsons presents on the “machinery” of the South shows that Adams was willing to remind his Southern colleagues that they had a special protection in the Constitution.

giving it no consideration, debate, or even official recognition.¹⁴ This was not enough. Days later, another slavery petition provoked a motion that it be rejected, an action which Congress had never taken toward any petition.¹⁵ Southern opponents could not continue to silence every petition in the House. In May of 1836, a committee led by Charles Pinckney of South Carolina proposed that all petitions relating to slavery be peremptorily tabled, “without being either printed or referred.”¹⁶ The Speaker refused to give Adams the chance to argue against the resolution’s assumption that Congress had no Constitutional authority over slavery in the states, and, instead of voting on the restriction of petitions, he shouted his belief that it was in direct violation of the House, the Constitution, and basic civil rights.¹⁷ The issue had become a violation of rights in the previous year, when a member of Congress motioned for the automatic rejection of future petitions for abolition in D. C.¹⁸ Since Adams held a conscientious view of the right of petition, his faithful representation and skillful speeches became the outlet for a flurry of abolitionist petitions over the next couple of years.¹⁹ In the 1837 to 1838 session alone, they flooded Congress with over 200,000 petitions relating to slavery in some form.²⁰

Yet Congress had received petitions against slavery from the beginning of the new nation.²¹ The cause that forced Adams from compliance was clear, but the sudden attack on petitions was more complex. Much of the powerful opposition to considering the issue of slavery in Congress was a result of political alliances. Many of the highest leaders during the founding

¹⁴ Miller, *Arguing About Slavery*, 27, 31-32.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 32-33.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 141-142. Quoted in Seward, *Life and Public Services of John Quincy Adams*, 281-282.

¹⁷ Seward, *Life and Public Services of John Quincy Adams*, 281-282. Parsons, *John Quincy Adams*, 225.

¹⁸ Parsons, *John Quincy Adams*, 224.

¹⁹ Seward, *Life and Public Services of John Quincy Adams*, 280-281.

²⁰ Parsons, *John Quincy Adams*, 226. Petitions introduced slavery by a variety of means, the most common still being abolition in D.C., while also using expansion into new territories and complaints against what became known as the gag rule. Though Adams was the primary means of presenting these petitions, other members brought similar petitions.

²¹ Miller, *Arguing About Slavery*, 28.

were slaveholders, and slaveholders continued to dominate the federal government for most of the first half century. The President, the Speaker of the House, the president of the Senate and the majority of both cabinet members and Supreme Court Justices were slaveholders for most of the first decades.²² Though many of the founders had been against slavery in principle, the immediate interests of the slaveholding section of the country were secure. In 1835, the Democratic Party was relying on an alliance of Southern planters and Northern common folk to win the Presidential election for Martin Van Buren in the following year.²³ Van Buren and President Andrew Jackson were motivated to avoid the extremes of some Southern attacks on abolitionists, but Democratic actions against petitioners, like Pinckney's resolution, were actually moderate in comparison.²⁴ In order to maintain political unity, debates over the divisive issue of slavery had to be silenced.

Regardless of immediate political concerns, the eventual result of attempts to stop petitioners was anything but silence. For many Southern members, loyalty to the South was much more important than political parties, and very real fear and anger fueled this sense of duty. The slave revolt led by Nat Turner in 1831, which killed sixty white people, was fresh in their minds.²⁵ Debate in Congress on slavery in the Missouri Compromise decades earlier had already inspired plans for revolt.²⁶ Now, abolitionists were sending pamphlets against slavery into the South and working up petition drives to press the issue in Congress.²⁷ Slurs against petitioners escalated throughout the debates, reaching the extremes of "foul murderers" and "fiends of hell."²⁸ It was no surprise that they also furiously opposed Adams. In January of 1837, he

²² Miller, *Arguing About Slavery*, 13. They were not all slaveholders, but a clear majority was.

²³ Parsons, *John Quincy Adams*, 224.

²⁴ Miller, *Arguing About Slavery*, 141.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 29.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 31.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 93-94, 108.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 36-37.

attempted to read a petition from 228 women related to his constituents who declared the sinfulness of slavery before God and the immediate need for abolition.²⁹ His short speech was so interrupted by objections that the Speaker was forced to concede to Southern members that Adams should not be allowed to read a petition as part of its presentation, even though this violated the right of free speech in Congress. Adams insisted that this had never been done before and must be recorded as a new rule. Nothing was too far for Southern members angry at abolitionist instigators.

The most well-known example of the outrage which Adams's petitions provoked was when he attempted to present what was allegedly a petition from slaves.³⁰ After presenting other petitions to a thin and poorly attentive audience, Adams merely submitted the slave petition to the Speaker for consideration, since it was so unusual in its source.³¹ When members from slave-holding states realized what was happening, the objections changed to threats. Cries of treason filled the House, and one member called out against the former president and venerated link to the founders, "Expel the scoundrel; put him out; do not let him disgrace the House any longer!"³² One member from Alabama called on all representatives of slave-holding states to come forward in response and suggested that if the House did not correct this injustice the Southern states should quit Congress and go home.³³ Another member declared himself a representative of the offended South, demanded that the petition be burned as an official act of Congress, and

²⁹ Seward, *Life and Public Services of John Quincy Adams*, 284-285. The petition appears to have been objectionable in its declaration of the institution of slavery as a grievous sin.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 286-293. Parsons, *John Quincy Adams*, 226. Parsons adds that another member claimed that the slaves were actually free black women from Fredericksburg, VA and were of doubtful character.

³¹ Seward, *Life and Public Services of John Quincy Adams*, 286-293. Parsons, *John Quincy Adams*, 226.

³² Quoted in Seward, *Life and Public Services of John Quincy Adams*, 287.

³³ *Ibid.* John Quincy Adams, *Letters from John Quincy Adams to his constituents of the Twelfth Congressional District in Massachusetts. To which is added his speech in Congress, delivered February 9, 1837* (Boston: I. Knapp, 1837), <http://archive.org/details/lettersfromjohnq00adam> (accessed November 11, 2012), 11. Adams shared an account of these events in a series of letters to his constituents, which confirms Seward's account.

suggested that anyone who did not support him undermined the continuance of the Union.³⁴

Adams added in his own account of the scene that someone even wished the presenter would be added to the flames.³⁵ After days of debate over putting Adams through legislative trial and a series of parliamentary moves to make his opposition look ridiculous, the House accepted advice that the petition posed no threat to the Union and settled on a resolution that no petition from slaves could be received by Congress.³⁶

Most petitioners were not slaves. They were Northern citizens who argued from a new set of moral priorities, and their opponents in the South took on their own moral tone. Societies for abolition formed around a new emphasis on the immediate abolition of slavery as top priority.³⁷ This moral movement was linked to effects from the Second Great Awakening.³⁸ However, these societies included a new view of racial equality too radical for most Americans, and they opposed the societies with violence in both the South and North.³⁹ Adams, who was not an immediate abolitionist, remained cautiously disconnected from such societies and hesitated to give partial attention to any one group of constituents to the national legislature.⁴⁰ His priority was to be a faithful representative of Americans in general in conveying their right of petition to the federal legislature, regardless of the petitioners' purpose or standing in society.⁴¹ Eventually, these convictions made him the voice of abolitionists anyway. His opponents in the House answered Adams and other presenters of petitions with a different moral priority. Since their

³⁴ Seward, *Life and Public Services of John Quincy Adams*, 287-288.

³⁵ Adams, *Letters from John Quincy Adams to his constituents*, 11.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 291. After a series of resolutions for his official censuring before the Speaker, Adams shocked his opponents by stating that the slave petition was in fact against the abolition of slavery. Parsons, *John Quincy Adams*, 227. Parsons explains the scene also, describing that through a series of arguments Adams was able to trap his opponents into essentially attempting to censure a member of Congress for simply giving an opinion.

³⁷ Miller, *Arguing About Slavery*, 66.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 41. Parsons, *John Quincy Adams*, 221.

³⁹ Miller, *Arguing About Slavery*, 74, 76.

⁴⁰ Parsons, *John Quincy Adams*, 232.

⁴¹ Seward, *Life and Public Services of John Quincy Adams*, 280-281.

lives and families were at stake, South Carolina member James Henry Hammond argued that it would be an act of righteousness to kill an abolitionist on sight.⁴² Others took positions at least less violent. Southern members pointed to Northern hypocrisy in their past participation in the slave trade and claimed that Southern society, including specifically slavery, had its own virtue founded on rank and honor.⁴³

Throughout all the debates Adams remained cautious toward abolition and even toward freed African slaves, but he also held a bold stance in upholding slaves' rights. Adams's attitude toward black people was a moderate mixture of unusual personal respect in social settings and doubt of their abilities as potential citizens.⁴⁴ Yet, when others cried out against the suggestion that they had any rights as persons, Adams did not back down from his conviction. In the chaos caused in the House by the slave petition, Adams rebuked his fellow representatives for denying the basic right of petition to anyone, no matter how low or corrupt they may be.⁴⁵ Even the most despotic governments accepted supplication from the lowliest subjects. Adams took an even stronger stance in what became the climax of his public efforts against slavery. The case before the Supreme Court in defense of Africans who had killed their captors denied the right to make persons into property and upheld the right of Africans for self-emancipation.⁴⁶ When Adams made his defense in the Court, he echoed these arguments and accused the federal executive of the injustice of conspiring against the Africans' lives for political motives.⁴⁷ However, in the midst of this bold, new stance, Adams turned to the principles of the American founding. He

⁴² Miller, *Arguing About Slavery*, 39.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 130-131, 133-134.

⁴⁴ Parsons, *John Quincy Adams*, 233-234.

⁴⁵ Seward, *Life and Public Services of John Quincy Adams*, 289-290.

⁴⁶ Howard Jones, *Mutiny on the Amistad: The Saga of a Slave Revolt and Its Impact on American Abolition, Law, and Diplomacy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 173, 175.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 176-177.

declared that the case had already been decided decades before when the Declaration of Independence recognized the right to life and liberty.⁴⁸

John Quincy Adams served in public offices during most of the Union's struggle with slavery. As American views diverged in a volatile battle of rights, the convictions he carried from his roots in the American founding led him to do what the founders could not. The ideas the founders established forced him to confront the contradiction they had tolerated. Though he did not live to see the removal of slavery, his symbolic link to the nation's past and his faithful defense of rights represented the need to resolve the contradiction at the heart of the Constitution.

⁴⁸ Parsons, *John Quincy Adams*, 239. Jones, *Mutiny on the Amistad*, 176.

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