

## *A Deluded Diplomat*

**John Adams and the Diplomacy of the American Revolution**, by James H. Hutson, *Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1980. vii + 199 pp. \$13.00.*

THERE IS A MYTH in American history that holds that the United States always wins the war but loses the peace. This notion is based on the nation's experience in the two world wars. After defeating the Central Powers in World War I, the United States faced a greater threat in Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan. Then, after defeating these powers in World War II, the nation faced an even greater menace in the Soviet Union and Communist China. These experiences convinced many Americans that the United States had mismanaged the peace negotiations and had frittered away its wartime gains by inept diplomacy with its allies and enemies. This view was popularized by veteran

diplomat William C. Bullitt in 1948 in a two-part *Life* magazine article entitled "How We Won the War and Lost the Peace."<sup>1</sup>

However valid this myth may be for the twentieth century, it certainly does not apply to the nation's earlier wars. American envoys emerged from the American Revolution, the Mexican War, and the Spanish-American War with significant and sizable territorial concessions from the enemy, and only shrewd and determined diplomacy enabled the nation to avoid surrendering territory at the end of the War of 1812. Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the United States was well served by its diplomats abroad in time of war.

The Peace of Paris in 1783 was in some ways the nation's greatest diplomatic triumph. Throughout the Revolutionary War Americans were able to turn traditional European rivalries to their own advantage. Thus, what began as a civil war within the British Empire in 1775 was

transformed by 1781 into an international contest with the United States, France, Spain, and the Netherlands openly at war with Britain, and with most of the rest of Europe arrayed against her in a League of Armed Neutrality. In the peace negotiations that ensued, the three American commissioners, John Jay, Benjamin Franklin, and John Adams, continued to play the great powers off against each other. By negotiating with Britain without consulting France, the Americans were able to defeat a Spanish-inspired plan to fix the western border of the United States at the Appalachian Mountains. The British, who were anxious to keep any disputed territory out of the hands of their traditional European rivals, willingly granted the United States a western boundary at the Mississippi River and a southern boundary along the northern edge of present-day Florida. Given America's rather tenuous claims to the vast territories in the south and west, these terms were magnanimous indeed.

In a new book based on his 1964 Yale dissertation, Dr. James Hutson tells the story of John Adams' role in the diplomacy of this war. Hutson reminds us that "[t]he foreign policy of the American Revolution was not revolutionary" — that American diplomacy was governed by the classical European concepts of the balance of power and the interests of nations. John Adams, who represented the United States in France and the Netherlands, as well as in the peace negotiations with Britain, was a devoted student of these principles, though for personal reasons he proved ineffective as a diplomat. Hutson rejects the favorable view of his diplomatic exploits that was so assiduously propagated by successive generations of Adamses in the nineteenth century. Instead, he portrays his protagonist as a man who was often "the sport of passions." The passion that tormented Adams the most throughout his career was vanity. This passion not only undermined his mental health but seriously hampered his diplomacy.

Because of his vanity, Adams was incapable of rationally evaluating his own

accomplishments. At times the claims he made on behalf of his achievements bordered on the ludicrous. He once insisted that a memorial he sent to the Dutch government — a memorial that actually did considerable damage — had produced a Dutch naval victory, induced the Austrian Emperor to establish religious freedom in his dominions, and assured the success of an American loan in France. On other occasions, he claimed that Dutch recognition of the United States (for which Adams somewhat dubiously took credit) had been more responsible than anything else for inducing the British to recognize American independence and to grant such favorable peace terms.

Because of his vanity, Adams could neither brook fame in others nor work harmoniously with men more gifted than himself. In Europe his *bêtes noires* were Franklin and the French foreign minister, Count Vergennes. Adams was convinced that these men were conspiring to besmirch his reputation and to keep the United States subservient to France. When Vergennes sought to have Adams recalled in 1781, it was not, as Adams' defenders have maintained, because he was too independent, but because he had become so obnoxious that it was almost impossible for others to work with him.

If Adams distrusted Vergennes, he despised and envied Franklin. Unable to endure the great scientist's enormous popularity in Paris while he himself was treated, as he said, like a "perfect Cypher," Adams launched broadside attacks on Franklin's character and competence. He spoke of Franklin's "Indolence," his "Dissipation," and his "Indiscretion," and of his "Malice," "Envy," and "Jealousy." He called Franklin an "unintellig[i]ble Politician," a "Demon of Discord," and the "Curse and Scourge of our foreign affairs." Adams also insisted that if the Pennsylvania diplomat were not relieved of his duties, he would ruin the nation's reputation and credit. Ironically, it was largely because of Franklin's great warmth and charm that the three American commissioners were able to achieve a measure of

harmony in their negotiations with England. However, it was neither Franklin nor Adams, but Jay, who was the principal negotiator in the exchanges with Britain.

Hutson's book is a lively and informative study, but it contains two small interpretative errors. The author says that America's revolutionary leaders regarded commerce as the purveyor of luxury and therefore "condemned it unsparingly." His evidence for this claim is rather thin, and in a commercial age in which almost every American's livelihood was tied directly or indirectly to the sea, it is difficult to believe that this view was widely held. Hutson also argues that commercial emancipation was not a goal of the Revolution and that Americans were content to live within the confines of Great Britain's commercial system. This flies in the face of substantial evidence of tea and molasses smuggling in the northern colonies and of resentment of British creditors in the southern colonies. It also fails to explain why Thomas Jefferson and his followers made such a persistent and determined attempt for a quarter of a century after the Revolution to break Britain's commercial shackles and to funnel American produce directly into the European continent through France.

These flaws, however, are minor and do not vitiate Hutson's accomplishment. His book is a valuable supplement to Peter Shaw's brilliant biography of Adams, and to the standard diplomatic treatments of Samuel Flagg Bemis, Richard B. Morris, and Richard W. Van Alstyne.<sup>2</sup> It deserves to be read by anyone interested in fathoming the character of John Adams or in fully understanding the diplomatic history of the American Revolution.

Reviewed by DONALD R. HICKEY

<sup>1</sup>William C. Bullitt, "How We Won the War and Lost the Peace," *Life* (August 30, 1948), 82-97, and (September 6, 1948), 86-103.

<sup>2</sup>Peter Shaw, *The Character of John Adams* (Chapel Hill, 1976); Samuel Flagg Bemis, *The Diplomacy of the American Revolution* (New York, 1935); Richard B. Morris, *The Peacemakers: The Great Powers and American Independence* (New York, 1965); Richard W. Van Alstyne, *Empire and Independence: The International History of the American Revolution* (New York, 1965).