

Frances Schendle on John Adams

George Washington is remembered for his successful command of the Continental Army and Thomas Jefferson is known as the author of the Declaration of Independence, but John Adams' major accomplishments are often forgotten. Yet, it was Adams who nominated Washington as an Army General who could recruit support from both the North and the South, and it was Adams who proposed a Declaration of Independence and suggested that it be written by Jefferson. Although there is not an Adams monument in Washington, D.C. his contributions to the country were significant.

Adams eventually served as the 2nd President of the United States, but his most notable accomplishments came earlier, when he served as a delegate from Massachusetts to the Continental Congress. In this capacity, he emerged early as a strong advocate of American independence – he lobbied hard to forge consensus among delegates who represented a diverse set of interests and who feared the decision would result in their own deaths at the hands of the British army.

Furthermore, as a brilliant and well-educated lawyer, Adams played an important role in shaping the new government in the United States. As the author of the Massachusetts Constitution and a pamphlet called *Thoughts on Government*, Adams introduced important ideas, such as a bicameral legislature, the separation of powers, and “enumerated powers” for an executive branch of government. Although Adams was serving American interests abroad when the U.S. Constitution was drafted, his ideas greatly influenced the document that was written.

Herein lies what I believe to be the *first* way in which Adams successfully integrated the different parts of his life: merging his work and community domains. Despite his initial dedication to his private legal practice and his intention to resist the political sphere, he felt so outraged by the injustices he observed that he was compelled in 1774 to accept the offer to become one of five delegates to the First Continental Congress in Philadelphia. By embracing politics as his career, he formally integrated two domains that otherwise competed for his time and focus.

For Adams, a career as a politician not only made sense because it eliminated a conflict between these two domains, but also because it allowed him to draw on his professional talents to impact his community. Indeed, Adams gained influence through his deep knowledge of the law and his dedication to a set of values that he tenaciously promoted.

Although his political accomplishments were impressive, a biographical sketch of John Adams would be far from complete without mention of his family life. John married Abigail Smith at age 29 and together, they had four children, one of whom (John Quincy Adams) would eventually follow his father to become the sixth President of the United States.

It is no secret that John Adams was deeply devoted to his family. However, Adams' ambitious political goals required great sacrifice on the home front, as he spent a significant amount of his life apart from Abigail and his children – first as a delegate to the Continental Congress, then as a diplomat in Europe. In a letter to Abigail on April 20, 1763, Adams wrote: “Love sweetens Life, and Life sometimes destroys Love.” It seems he understood that the demanding nature of his objectives in the work and community domains created a very real tension with his aspirations for himself as a husband.

Nevertheless, I believe that the *second* way in which John Adams integrated parts of his life was in his ability to overcome this tension between his political career (work/community domains) and the home domain. In fact, John and Abigail were united in their commitment to John's political goals. John wrote in his diary that, “she thought I had done as I ought, she was very willing to share in all that was to come.” Consequently, John and

Abigail operated much like a team. John regularly wrote to Abigail, using her as a source of strength when his long days in Congress brought him exhaustion and frustration.

Adams even discussed with Abigail the issues he was fighting for in Philadelphia, including the arguments he made in support of “independency” and the frustrating political dynamics he navigated at Congress. Famously, Abigail wrote to John about her belief in the emancipation of slaves and the expansion of rights for women, hoping to influence his thinking as he developed his vision for a new government.

By engaging Abigail in these discussions, he made his goals *their* goals. Though she was not herself participating in political debates, she felt invested in John’s success and supported his decision to spend so much time away. John and Abigail’s relationship offers a unique illustration of how an individual may be able to “align” his interests and values between two of the four circles, while still feeling a tension between them due to time constraints.

There are a number of other ways in which John Adams successfully integrated the parts of his life. For example, one of his most trusted friends, Thomas Jefferson, was also his greatest political adversary with whom he spent hours upon hours debating philosophy and politics. And despite his full schedule, he always dedicated Sunday to visiting Church, where he contemplated his underlying values, the source of his political beliefs.

There are a number of lessons I hope to learn from John Adams. First, all of Adam’s decisions reflected his commitment to a set of core beliefs, which he espoused both in his public and private life. Thus, while he undoubtedly experienced conflicts between domains, his ability to align around these values allowed him to achieve the “wholeness” we all strive for. I am thus reminded of the importance of keeping my own core values top of mind and using them as a guide when life presents difficult decisions or conflicts between domains. Second, the story of John Adams inevitably reinvigorates my desire to play a role in the public sphere at some point in my career. Like Adams, I believe I have a professional skill set that could be leveraged for social impact.

Third, the relationship between John and Abigail offers an inspiring model for how a marriage can function as a team, not only in the shared home domain, but also in each partner’s pursuits in work, community, and self. Certainly, I hope that my future husband will be as interested in healthcare reform as Abigail was in the creation of a new government, but even if this is not the case, I know that I want to find a way to engage my family in my work so that they may feel as invested in my professional successes as I am.

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Sources

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