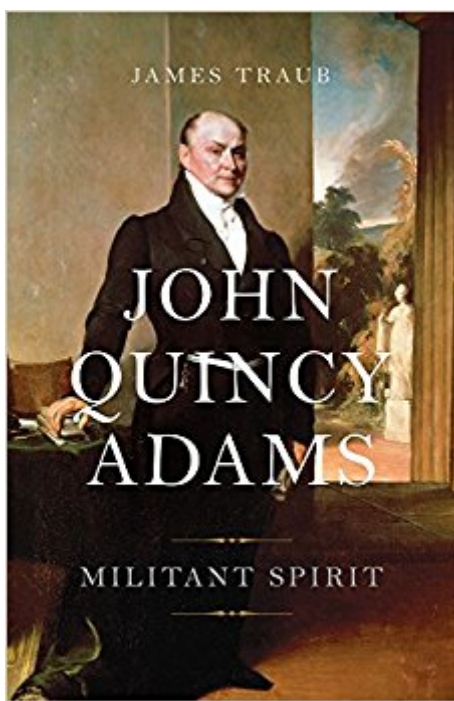


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John Quincy Adams: Militant Spirit



Synopsis

John Quincy Adams was the last of his kind—a Puritan from the age of the Founders who despised party and compromise, yet dedicated himself to politics and government. The son of John Adams, he was a brilliant ambassador and secretary of state, a frustrated president at a historic turning point in American politics, and a dedicated congressman who literally died in office—at the age of 80, in the House of Representatives, in the midst of an impassioned political debate. In *John Quincy Adams*, scholar and journalist James Traub draws on Adams's diary, letters, and writings to evoke a diplomat and president whose ideas remain with us today. Adams was a fierce nationalist who, as secretary of state, championed the idea of American expansion. Yet, at the same time he warned against moralistic and militaristic policies abroad—a chastening wisdom that makes him the father of what we now call "realism" in foreign policy. As president, he was a bold proponent of the idea of activist government later brought to fruition by Abraham Lincoln and others. Adams's numerous achievements—and equally numerous failures—stand as testaments to his unwavering moral convictions. A man who refused to take refuge in the politically prudent course of action, Adams was repudiated by his own Federalist party and, as president, by the nation that voted him out of office. And yet, in the final decade of his life, Adams regained the country's regard, and even reverence, for as a congressman he often stood alone against the forces of slavery, twice beating back motions of censure. *John Quincy Adams* tells the story of this brilliant, flinty, and unyielding man whose life exemplified political courage—a life against which each of us might measure our own.

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Customer Reviews

Mr. Traub has written an excellent biography of one of the most underappreciated titans of our Republic. Adams was a man of impeccable integrity and clung dearly to his principles of individual liberty, republicanism, foreign policy realism and nationalism, often at the expense of his political fortunes. His life serves as a model to counter the current status quo of our self-serving politicians. He was a staunch defender of our founding principles and vigorously fought the "slavocracy" with passion and intellectual force. Traub does an excellent job of highlighting this man's virtues, as well as his faults. He has done a tremendous service to a man all but forgotten by history. With the exception of Alexander Hamilton and Mr. Adams' own father, there may not be a man who was so instrumental to our history that receives less credit than he is due. He is without a doubt one of our greatest diplomats and congressmen.

Adams. As hard as the rocky soil of Braintree Massachusetts. Long before the Bush father and son presidential team there were the famous Adams family! John Quincy was the son of John Adams the second POTUS. He was a stern and stiff Puritan who would not entertain fools with gladness in his flinty heart. He was among other things: 1. The greatest American diplomat of the nineteenth century: Adams served well in such difficult embassies as those established in Russia during the Napoleonic era, France, the Hague in Holland and the Court of St. James in London. He was a tough and skillful negotiator. 2. Adams was an early advocate of manifest destiny strongly calling for American expansionism all the way to the West Coast. 3. He was the author of the Monroe Doctrine while serving that president as Secretary of State. 4. Adams was a one term president who had difficulty with Congress and his political foes. The nation did remain at peace during his one term presidency. He lost to Andrew Jackson in their 1828 contest for the White House. 5. Adams was an extremely learned man. He read and wrote several languages; wrote a fascinating diary for over fifty years; was an expert on weights and measures and owned a huge library. Brilliant! 6. Adams served in several important governmental positions from Secretary of State, US Senator from Mass. POTUS and as a US Congressman following his service as POTUS. 7. Adams was a strong advocate for the rights of African-Americans. He helped free the Amistad slave revolt persons and died on the floor of the House of Representatives fighting for African-Americans rights. 8. Adams was a man of principle but he was not adverse to fighting well in the dirty donnybrook arena known as American politics! 9. Adams and his wife Louisa Catherine Adams (she is the only first lady to

date who was not born on American soil being the daughter of an American father and English mother) had a passionate and at times stormy marriage. They raised several children. One of the sons was an alcoholic; a daughter died as a baby and Charles Francis Adams became a brilliant diplomat like his father.¹⁰ The so called "corrupt deal" which handed JQA the presidency in a deal with Henry Clay is well covered by Traub. Adams was a great man and deserves to be remembered. I have read other biographies on him by Fred Kaplan and Paul C. Nagel which are also topnotch and worth reading and comparing. James Traub writes well as we learn about Adams and his turbulent times. The blood sport of American hardball politics was as rough then as it is now.

My ongoing project to read a scholarly biography of every American president took a major step forward earlier this month when I discovered a brand-new biography of John Quincy Adams, the sixth President of the United States. Written by journalist and author James Traub, *John Quincy Adams: Militant Spirit* is a masterful example of the presidential biographer's art. In this superb book, Traub draws a highly detailed and multi-dimensional portrait of John Quincy Adams and the times in which he lived. Born in 1767, John Quincy Adams was the oldest child of John Adams (American founding father and second president) and Abigail Smith Adams. Young John Quincy always strove to meet the high expectations of his parents, both of whom demanded from him not only great scholarly accomplishment, but also behavior of the highest rectitude. John Quincy acquired a first-rate classical education under the guidance of his father. He was keenly intellectual, and, by his own admission, highly reserved, judgmental, and rather cold and aloof—much like his parents. Also like his parents, he was a progressive thinker, and a lifelong, resolute foe of slavery. In his teen years and early adulthood, John Quincy Adams served as his father's private secretary while the elder Adams was negotiating the Treaty of Paris that ended the Revolutionary War. He was well traveled; he served as an ambassador of the fledgling United States to several European countries; all the while continuing his education. He returned home and briefly served as a Senator from Massachusetts. His unpopular stands on several issues led him to leave office before finishing his term. Later in life, he served as Secretary of State in the administration of President James Monroe. He was then elected as the sixth President of the United States, but once again his unpopularity led to his defeat for reelection to a second term. His long political career was not over, though. After he left the presidency, he was elected to the House of Representatives from his home district. He became the only person in American history to accomplish this. He served in the House for eight terms, until his death in 1848 at age 80. Traub examines in detail several key aspects of Adams' life. These include his not always harmonious

marriage to Louisa Johnson Adams, a union marked by the tragedies of Louisa's frequent miscarriages and the deaths of three of their children; Adams's eloquent defense before the Supreme Court of 44 Africans who had escaped from the slave ship *Amistad*; and his ultimately successful ten-year battle in the Southern (and therefore pro-slavery) dominated House of Representatives against the gag rule, which prohibited House members from accepting anti-slavery petitions from their constituents. Traub backs up his supremely readable narrative of John Quincy Adams's life with impressive scholarship. He relies extensively on John Quincy Adams's diaries, which run to 51 volumes and over 14,000 pages. Traub also cites other biographical and historical works about Adams and the era in which he lived. Throughout this book, Traub demonstrates a thorough mastery not only of John Quincy Adams's life but also of the times in which he lived. *John Quincy Adams: Militant Spirit* ranks among the best presidential biographies I have ever read. Most highly recommended.

Reading this book in a US election year was sort of depressing, because it made me (starkly) realize that, when it comes to many of our leaders, we're in a sort of reverse evolution. This book brings the brilliant and quirky John Quincy Adams to life. He's perhaps best described by the last words of the text, referring to his wife Louisa: "Her husband, whose soul she had penetrated as no other mortal had and whom she found exasperating, tendentious, intolerant, self-absorbed, and yet, in the end, magnificent." This is a wonderful book and well worth reading.

This is a thoroughly readable book about a man almost impossible to love, but perhaps equally impossible not to admire. In a real sense, it serves as a history of the U.S. from about 1775 to 1846. The parallels, admittedly not explored here, to Jimmy Carter in our own time seem striking.

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