
Abigail and John Adams Discuss Women and Republican Government 1776

During the American Revolution (1775–1783), the American colonies fought against Great Britain for the formation of an independent United States. Women within colonial America were primarily concerned with domestic and family affairs and depended on their fathers and husbands to represent them publicly. John Adams (1735–1826), lawyer, political diplomat during the revolutionary war, and second president of the United States (1797–1801) was an influential figure during the American Revolution. He participated in the revolutionary-era debate over the nature of the new governments and traveled to Europe to help negotiate the peace treaty with Great Britain. During his travels, he debated the political place of women through correspondences he maintained with his wife Abigail Adams (1744–1818) and others such as Massachusetts politician James Sullivan (1744–1808). The following letters provide a window into the views of Abigail and John Adams on the political place of women during the revolutionary era. –Renata Fengler

Bibliography: Charles W. Akers, *Abigail Adams: An American Women* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1980), 32, 59, & 66.

Letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams, March 31, 1776

Abigail Adams wrote the following letter while her husband John Adams was attending the Continental Congress to support American independence. Abigail Adams asked her husband to “remember the ladies” when establishing laws for the new nation. Her bold assertions and grievances in this letter reveal the social place of women during the revolutionary period as well her concern for and understanding of political issues during this time. –R.F.

[1] I long to hear that you have declared an independency. And, by the way, in the new code of laws which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make, I desire you would remember the ladies and be more generous and favorable to them than your ancestors. Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the husbands. Remember, all men would be tyrants if they could.

[2] If particular care and attention is not paid to the ladies, we are determined to foment a rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any laws in which we have no voice or representation.

[3] That your sex are naturally tyrannical is a truth so thoroughly established as to admit of no dispute; but such of you as wish to be happy willingly give up the harsh title of master for the more tender and endearing one of friend.

[4] Why, then, not put it out of the power of the vicious and the lawless to use us with cruelty and indignity with impunity? Men of sense in all ages abhor those customs which treat us only as the vassals of your sex; regard us then as beings placed by Providence under your protection, and in imitation of the Supreme Being make use of that power only for our happiness.

Letter of Response from John Adams to Abigail Adams, April 14, 1776

[5] As to your extraordinary code of laws, I cannot but laugh. We have been told that our struggle has loosened the bonds of government everywhere; that children and apprentices were disobedient; that schools and colleges were grown turbulent; that Indians slighted their guardians, and negroes grew insolent to their masters. But your letter was the first intimation that another tribe, more numerous and powerful than all the rest, were grown discontented.— This is rather too coarse a Compliment but you are so saucy, I won't blot it out.

[6] Depend upon it, we know better than to repeal our masculine systems. Although they are in full force, you know they are little more than theory. We dare not exert our power in its full latitude. We are obliged to go fair and softly, and, in practice, you know we are the subjects. We have only the name of masters, and rather than give up this, which would completely subject us to the despotism of the petticoat, I hope General Washington and all our brave heroes would fight; I am sure every good politician would plot, as long as he would against despotism, empire, monarchy, aristocracy, oligarchy, or ochlocracy.¹

Letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams, August 14, 1776

[7] If you complain of neglect of education in sons, what shall I say with regard to daughters, who every day experience the want of it? With regard to the education of my own children, I find myself soon out of my depth, and destitute and deficient in every part of education. . . .

[8] I most sincerely wish that some more liberal plan might be laid and executed for the benefit of the rising generation, and that our new constitution may be distinguished for learning and virtue. If we mean to have heroes, statesmen and philosophers, we should have learned women. The world perhaps would laugh at me, and accuse me of vanity, but you I know have a mind too enlarged and liberal to disregard the sentiment. If much depends as is allowed upon the early education of youth and the first principals which are instilled take the deepest root, great benefit must arise from literary accomplishments in women.

Letter from John Adams to James Sullivan, May 26, 1776

In 1776, James Sullivan (1744–1808) was a state court judge in Massachusetts who often sympathized with those who challenged the subordination of women while believing that all people “out of wardship”² should have some involvement in legislation. Disagreeing with this, John Adams explained to James Sullivan why women were excluded from the right to vote and better suited for domestic affairs.³—R.F.

[9] It is certain in Theory, that the only moral Foundation of Government is the Consent of the People, But to what an Extent Shall We carry this Principle? Shall We Say, that every Individual of the Community, old and young, male and female, as well as rich and poor, must consent, expressly to every Act of Legislation? No, you will Say. This is impossible. How then does the Right arise in the Majority to govern the Minority, against their Will? Whence arises the Right

¹ Mob rule

² Custody or guardianship

³ Linda K. Kerber, *Toward an Intellectual History of Women* (Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1997), 287.

of the Men to govern Women, without their Consent? Whence the Right of the old to bind the Young, without theirs.

[10] But let us first Suppose, that the whole Community of every Age, Rank, Sex, and Condition, has a Right to vote. This Community, is assembled—a Motion is made and carried by a Majority of one Voice. The Minority will not agree to this. Whence arises the Right of the Majority to govern, and the Obligation of the Minority to obey? from Necessity, you will Say, because there can be no other Rule. But why exclude Women? You will Say, because their Delicacy renders them unfit for Practice and Experience, in the great Business of Life, and the hardy Enterprises of War, as well as the arduous Cares of State. Besides, their attention is So much engaged with the necessary Nurture of their Children, that Nature has made them fittest for domestic Cares. And Children have not Judgment or Will of their own.

[11] True. But will not these Reasons apply to others? Is it not equally true, that Men in general in every Society, who are wholly destitute of Property, are also too little acquainted with public Affairs to form a Right Judgment, and too dependent upon other Men to have a Will of their own? If this is a Fact, if you give to every Man, who has no Property, a Vote, will you not make a fine encouraging Provision for Corruption by your fundamental Law? Such is the Frailty of the human Heart, that very few Men, who have no Property, have any Judgment of their own. They talk and vote as they are directed by Some Man of Property, who has attached their Minds to his Interest.

[12] Depend upon it, sir, it is dangerous to open So fruitfull a Source of Controversy and Altercation, as would be opened by attempting to alter the Qualifications of Voters. There will be no End of it. New Claims will arise. Women will demand a Vote. Lads from 12 to 21 will think their Rights not enough attended to, and every Man, who has not a Farthing, will demand an equal Voice with any other in all Acts of State. It tends to confound and destroy all Distinctions, and prostrate all Ranks, to one common Level.

Discussion Questions:

1. What was Abigail Adams asking for from her husband? How did her arguments reflect the ideals behind the American Revolution? How did her comments about women's education reflect the concept of "republican motherhood"?
2. What did John Adams suggest when he referred to women as "another tribe"? When contemplating this, consider how Adams aligned this "tribe" with children, Native Americans, and African Americans.
3. What reasons did John Adams give to explain why women, children, and the poor should be denied the right to vote? What did Adams fear would happen if women obtained the right to vote?

SOURCES: Charles Francis Adams, ed., *Familiar Letters of John Adams and His Wife Abigail Adams, During the Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass.: Houghton & Co., 1875), 149–150, 213, 155; Adams to Sullivan, *Founder's Library*, <<http://www.founding.com/library/lbody.cfm?id=135&parent=54>>, retrieved December 12, 2005. Paragraph numbers have been added. Some punctuation has been modernized for clarity.

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