

To the White House Born

John Quincy Adams

By Fred Kaplan

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Intelligent, learned, steeped in diplomatic experience, John Quincy Adams entered the presidency in 1825 determined to govern in a nonpartisan fashion and to advance his agenda for affirmative national government. Looking back later on his one-term presidency, he judged it an almost complete failure.

Historians generally rank Adams in the middle of the presidential pack. "The failure, if that is the word," historian Robert V. Remini remarked in his brief 2002 biography, "was really brought on by his own inadequacies as a leader and politician." Adams's stiff personality—"I am a man of reserved, cold austere and forbidding manners," he admitted—worked against him, but it was not just that. The sixth president, a privileged son of the second, failed to adapt himself to "the democratic ferment of the 1820s," as the historian Sean Wilentz has written.

"He appeared as if he wanted to impose his benevolent will on the people, instead of heeding the people's will."

In "John Quincy Adams: American Visionary"—a well-researched and well-written, if over-long, biography—Fred Kaplan tries to cast the president in a more heroic light. In his State of the Union message in December 1825, Adams set forth "a visionary agenda."

At the top of it was a comprehensive policy for a national transportation infrastructure—building new roads, bridges and canals. He also called for a national university, a naval academy, a Pacific exploratory expedition and even an astronomical observatory.

How to pay for these ambitious projects? The sale of public land, Adams said, would provide abundant revenue. But would the public—especially those who favored states' rights and slavery or who wanted to buy federal land at cheaper prices—support this enhanced role for the federal government? Sensing the answer, Adams urged lawmakers not to be "palsied by the will of our constituents."

Mr. Kaplan, an English professor emeritus at Queens College and a veteran biographer, neglects to mention this remarkable exhortation, which by itself suggests how far "above" public opinion Adams stood and how unrealistic his lofty agenda then was.

By the end of 1825, partisans for Andrew Jackson and other presidential aspirants had joined forces "to make Adams a one-term president," Mr. Kaplan writes. Adams's vision of an affirmative national government represented everything that his foes detested. In the following fall and winter, the anti-administration coalition won a majority in both the Senate and the House. "The weakness of Adams' presidency" was not mainly due to his deficiencies as a po-

litical leader, Mr. Kaplan argues; rather it "resulted from the determination of his political opponents not to allow him any public policy achievements. With divided government, they had the power to do that."

Adams proposed paying for his agenda by selling public land, urging lawmakers not to be 'palsied by the will of our constituents.'

Adams's experience showed how hard it is to turn "vision into reality in a country that often appears ungovernable"—a problem as evident in our day as in his, Mr. Kaplan says. Critics of the Iraq war who invoked Adams's assertion, in a July 4 speech in 1821, that America "goes not abroad, in search of monsters to destroy" certainly thought that his outlook remained pertinent.

When Adams delivered that speech, he was secretary of state. He had been in training for such a post almost from birth (in 1767). John and Abigail Adams had drummed into him that he must study hard, cultivate a good character and accomplish great things. In 1778, at age 10, he left Braintree, Mass., to accompany his father on his diplomatic mission to Paris. At the top of the boy's reading list: Thucydides and Hobbes. By the time he was 18, he had crossed the Atlantic four times, learned French and other languages, and spent long stretches in The Hague, Amsterdam and St. Petersburg. He was ready for Harvard and then the study of law.

President George Washington in 1794 named him U.S. minister at The Hague. President John Adams three years later appointed him minister plenipotentiary to Berlin. From 1803 to 1808, he served as a U.S. senator from Massachusetts. In 1809, President James Madison nominated him to be U.S. minister plenipotentiary to Russia—and six years later, to Great Britain, where he helped end the War of 1812. In 1817 President James Monroe named him secretary of state.

Adams was a great secretary of state, perhaps the greatest. That's not the claim of Mr. Kaplan, who mostly prefers to stick to his close-up narrative. But it is the judgment of historians like Mr. Remini: "His negotiating skills and diplomatic insights were mainly responsible for the transformation of the United States into a trans-continental nation." In an 1819 treaty with Spain, the U.S. formally gave up its claim to Texas, but Spain gave up its claims to the Pacific Northwest, and the U.S. gained Florida for \$5,000. Adams also was responsible for the drafting of the Monroe Doctrine (1823), warning European powers to stay out of the Americas.

Adams left the White House in 1829, having lost to Jackson in a landslide. The next year he embarked on a distinguished career as a congressman, fighting against the spread of slavery and opposing the Mexican War. Not universally liked but widely respected, Adams in Congress "kept to his seat, often reading or writing, for most of the hours the House was in session," Mr. Kaplan writes. He was a "small, bald, somewhat fragile-looking legislator who, when he rose to speak, transformed himself into a sharp-tongued, gesticulating dynamo of moral passion and legislative cunning." In 1841, he successfully argued before the Supreme Court the case for freeing 39 captive Africans who had rebelled aboard the slave schooner *Amistad* (as dramatized in a 1997 film). After meeting him in the House the following year, Charles Dickens wrote that Adams was "a lasting honor to the land that gave him birth." As Mr. Kaplan shows in his admiring and admirable account, he was that and more, regardless of the failure of his "visionary" presidency.

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