



XVI/XXV



Statesmen, Politicians, Gentlemen: From Chivalry to the Colosseum



Dear United States of America,

Thomas Jefferson was tall, elegant, philosophical, and famously averse to direct confrontation. John Adams was short, stout, prone to vivid outbursts of emotion, and constitutionally incapable of disguising what he thought. They met at the Continental Congress in 1775, worked together on the committee to draft the Declaration of Independence, served as diplomats in Europe in the 1780s — Jefferson in Paris, Adams in London — and became, for a time, genuine friends. They toured English gardens together. They visited Shakespeare’s birthplace and, in Adams’s words, chipped off a piece of his chair “according to the custom.” They wrote each other letters of real warmth and intellectual depth. Then they went home, politics intervened, and they spent a decade in cold silence — nursing the wounds of the bitterest presidential election the young republic had yet produced. The election of 1800 was, by any measure, a brutal affair. Federalists painted Jefferson as a godless radical who would upend the social order; Democratic-Republicans accused Adams of aspiring to monarchy. By the time Jefferson won, the friendship was in ruins. Adams left Washington before the inauguration, refusing to witness the handover of power. For eleven years, no letters passed between them.

What brought them back together was a mutual friend, Benjamin Rush — physician, fellow signer of the Declaration, and apparently a man of considerable diplomatic patience. Rush worked with both of them for years. In 1811, a neighbour of Jefferson’s visited Adams in Massachusetts and returned with the report that Adams had said: “*I always loved Jefferson, and still love him.*” Jefferson, on hearing this, wrote to Rush: “*this is enough for me. I only needed this knowledge to revive towards him all the affections of the most cordial moments of our lives.*” On New Year’s Day 1812, Adams sent a short letter to Monticello. Jefferson replied. And so began one of the most remarkable correspondences in American history — 158 letters over fourteen years, ranging across philosophy, religion, politics, the legacy of the Revolution, the prospect of death, and everything in between. Adams wrote 109 of them; Jefferson 49. “*You and I,*” Adams wrote in 1813, “*ought not to die before we have explained ourselves to each other.*” Benjamin Rush, reflecting on what they had become to one another, called them “*the North and South poles of the American Revolution.*”

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It ended as it perhaps had to. On July 4, 1826 — the fiftieth anniversary of the Declaration of Independence — both men died. Adams, surrounded by family in Massachusetts, did not know that Jefferson had already gone. His last words, by his family’s account, were: “*Thomas Jefferson survives.*” He did not. The nation mourned them together, as it always should have. It is one of the most remarkable exits in the history of democratic governance — two men who had built a republic, fallen out over it, found their way back to each other, and then departed on the very day their great work turned fifty.

The Founders were not saints. They were ambitious, vain, sometimes petty, often wrong. But they were also, at their best, capable of exactly this: of putting the argument down, picking up a pen, and writing to the man they disagreed with. American political culture has travelled a considerable distance since then — not always in the direction one might have hoped. The elegant letter has given way to the sharp tweet, the pamphlet to the cable segment, the measured speech to the rally chant. Whether this represents a genuine decline or simply a change in register is a question historians will argue over for some time. What is probably true is that the founders’ brand of political rivalry — fierce, personal, sometimes vicious, but ultimately conducted among people who had read the same books, fought the same war, and share a fundamental commitment to the experiment they were arguing about — was always going to be difficult to replicate.

They were a remarkable generation, and they knew it. What is also true is that the rowdiness is not entirely new. American politics has never been as *genteel* as nostalgia suggests. But the Adams-Jefferson correspondence remains a standard worth knowing about — a reminder that two men can disagree on almost everything, wound each other deeply, fall silent for a decade, and still find their way back. That, in the end, may be the most American story of all.

Yours, with great admiration and transatlantic devotion,

Franz J. Heidinger

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