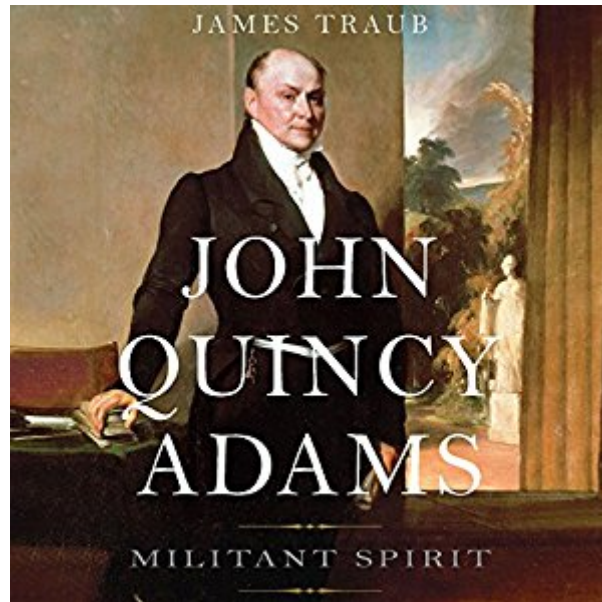




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John Quincy Adams: Militant Spirit



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' 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' 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.

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' 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' life with impressive scholarship. He relies extensively on John Quincy Adams' 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' 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.

John Quincy Adams bordered on a child prodigy. He was fluent in German, French, and English. He had a deep understanding of Russian and Latin. He was the new republic's ambassador to The Hague when he was 24. His diplomatic cables, back to the United States, were models of insight, coherence and purpose. The country's first president, George Washington, found them to be unparalleled in their sophistication and used their thoughts in his Farewell Address to the nation. His father, equally stern and flinty, became the second President of the United States, and was always John Quincy's role model and instructor. His mother, Abigail, was one of the most intellectually accomplished women in the young Republic. Whatever the gene was that

conferred intellectual brilliance, it passed for one more generation, to John Quincy Adams's son, Charles Francis Adams, who became one of the nation's greatest historians. John Quincy Adams's political journey was unusual in the young republic. He started his career as a traditional Federalist, the party of Washington and Hamilton, the party that argued for a strong federal government, with the states taking a decidedly secondary role. But over time his politics drifted away from Federalism, most conspicuously in Adams's support for a bill that effectively embargoed British trade with its former colonies. Adams, in fact, was siding with Thomas Jefferson, the president at the time, who was at the time by far the most important Republican in the young country. The embargo bill was overturned in the last days of Jefferson's presidency and was replaced by a bill that restricted trade with both Britain and France, ultimately and tragically leading to the War of 1812. Adams's career, though threatened by his differences with his largely pro-British constituency in Massachusetts, moved from his appointment by the newly-elected president, James Madison, to ambassador to Russia, to becoming Secretary of State under Madison's successor, James Monroe. It was Adams, far more than Monroe, who conceived of the Monroe Doctrine. His elevation to the presidency in 1824 was the result of one of the strangest elections in American history. Andrew Jackson, the hero of the War of 1812, won the popular vote by more than a 3 to 2 margin over Adams, and 4 to 1 over two other candidates, Henry Clay and William Crawford. But the lack of a majority in the Electoral College threw the election into the House of Representatives, where the vote of each state, one by one, would count. Henry Clay, a fierce opponent of Jackson, withdrew, shifting his support to Adams, who became the sixth president of the United States. In a sense, the best part of Adams's contribution to the history of the country came after his presidency, when he served as a representative from a small district in eastern Massachusetts. He served continuously from 1830 until his death in 1848, shifting his party affiliation from the Federalist part to the Republican party and then the Whig party. His contribution to the debate on slavery was decisive as this critical issue moved steadily to the forefront of American politics. John Quincy Adams died in the House of Representatives with Henry Clay at his side, weeping. James Traub tackles the vast history of John Quincy Adams with great skill. This is a difficult story to tell; it encompasses so many years, so many political fights, so many skilled adversaries, so many great events. Mr. Traub carefully disassembles the major issues, tells us how Adams made a difference to the many national conversations about these issues, and slowly paints the picture of a man who was never adored, unlike some of his predecessors, but was always respected. Here again, as was the case with so many Americans in the early days of the republic, the country was fortunate to have had a man of such erudition and judgment as John Quincy

Adams.

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