

BookTalk

... OF WHICH REASON KNOWS NOTHING

By William Marina

John Adams

By David McCullough

Simon & Schuster, 353 pages, \$35

As David McCullough's new biography of John Adams suggests, Adams and Thomas Jefferson will remain forever linked within the history of the origins of the American Republic. The author apparently began with the intention of writing about both men, but ended up focusing on Adams.

McCullough has divided Adams's life into three sections. The first part takes us from the beginnings of his career through his leadership in the movement that culminated in independence. The second covers his diplomatic efforts in France and London to secure victory during the Revolution, and stability in the years that followed. The final part details his vice presidential years, his Presidency, and his time in retirement. The book culminates with Adams's death on the Fourth of July, 1826, the same day Thomas Jefferson passed away.

How to explain the growing appreciation of John Adams today, while Jefferson's reputation appears to be in decline? Reading McCullough's account of their intertwined lives, many would agree that Jefferson's character appears flawed when compared to Adams's. Thomas Jefferson was a master (like William Jefferson Clinton) of telling people what they wanted to hear. He was capable of a disingenuousness and even duplicity that was alien to Adams. In short, Jefferson lacked the one ingredient most valued by the men of his generation such as George

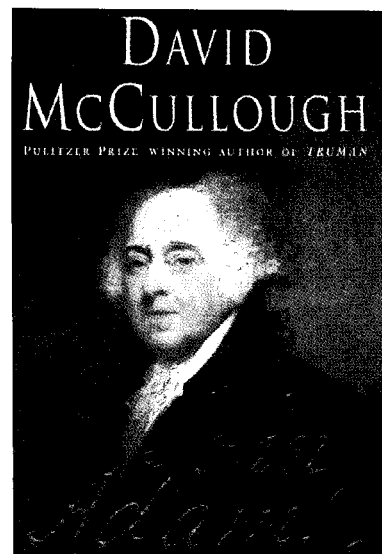
Washington: virtue.

Honesty and personal virtue are where Jefferson fails next to Adams. This is evident in the letters between the two men (though, unfortunately, McCullough fails to assess the correspondence in any great detail). Of course, a man might be honest, even virtuous, yet utterly wrongheaded, so we need to know more about the substance of Adams's beliefs. If I had to select one weakness in this book, it would be McCullough's failure to adequately explore the basic framework of Adams's worldview and values.

While both Adams and Jefferson could agree that there was "a natural aristocracy among men," and that "the grounds of this are virtue and talents," they differed fundamentally about the nature of these talents and how virtue could be taught. As some Chinese scholars have noted, Jefferson was quite Confucian in his thinking. This is not accidental; Confucian notions—such as the idea that an academic system should be the primary basis for identifying human talent—were current in the French philosophical circles so influential on Jefferson, having been imported from China by French Jesuit missionaries.

Thus Jefferson favored a state-supported school system to seek out the talented among "the rabble." Adams, on the other hand, understood that there are many talents in a market-oriented free society beyond academic ones. Those who believe Adams incapable of humor might reflect on his reply to Jefferson that even a king's mistress displays certain talents.

Adams believed that virtue could only be taught by role models in the family and in the larger society, especially by



leaders. As Americans observe the behavior of their leaders today—the lack of virtue and the extent of personal corruption—Adams's wisdom appears as insightful as ever.

If an important function of biography is to instruct us by moral example of the good, the bad, and the tragic, then McCullough's book is a flawed effort. He offers enough evidence for us to understand why, in the course of his research, he came to appreciate Adams more and Jefferson less in matters of character. And that is useful. But he should have gone further to give us a better sense of Adams's more practical, more widely based definition of merit and talent, and why his worldview is a more relevant guide for us today than Jefferson's mandarin elitism.

Jefferson will always remain popular with those intellectuals who lean toward using government planning to shape the parameters of society. In many ways, Jefferson was the first of the progressives, and there is little wonder why he was so popular among them later. Such persons value "reason" over "experience," just as did the European Enlightenment intellectuals of whom Jefferson was the true American heir.

But there is another tradition, less enamored of "experts" and more trusting of everyday people and evolved social institutions and practices. Alexis de Tocqueville, upon hearing a description of the French bureaucracy emerging in his day, once remarked, "Ah, le system chinois" (the Chinese system). He under-

stood early on the nature of the rule by reason that academic bureaucrats have used to dominate the modern world from Washington to Brussels to Beijing. I suspect John Adams understood it as well—and wished to avoid it in the new country he helped to establish.

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OUR ALLY, THE STATE?

By Bruce Ramsey

The Trouble With Government

By Derek Bok

Harvard University Press, 493 pages, \$35

Why don't Americans like government? They want their Social Security checks, they want to protect the whooping cranes, and they support the minimum wage. They almost always reelect their senators and representatives. But when polled, the same Americans rank elected pols down among car salesmen and union bosses.

This bothers Derek Bok. In *The Trouble With Government*, the Harvard professor emeritus, famous as a defender of racial preferences, has come again to the defense of the administrative state. Americans, he says, "have come to depend on the State to meet so many of their needs." We aim for a level of security that "no society on earth has achieved without the active leadership of the State," yet have a "profound distrust of the federal establishment."

With such a suspicious frame of mind, Americans are unlikely to get the bold new social programs they seem to want. "Voters may be unwilling to accept additional taxes," Bok worries. Further, he says, all this suspicion might "eventually weaken the moral authority of the State," which would be even a worse thing, because the State "is the one administrative agency that can define, enunciate, and validate a set of common moral standards and obligations for all the people."

The core of this book is Bok's desire to make government work better so that we will quit bellyaching about it and accept more of it. He repeatedly com-

pares us with other industrial welfare states, which have been so much better in seeing that every citizen has a doctor and every worker is in a union. Americans would have these things, too, if we weren't so suspicious of government.

What is the matter with us? Why did we reject the Clinton health plan? Why don't we have more government television channels, or pay "subsidies to make serious public-affairs programming more attractive to commercial producers"? Americans have a tradition, unfortunately still extant, of "individualism, the reliance on competition and the distrust of authority."

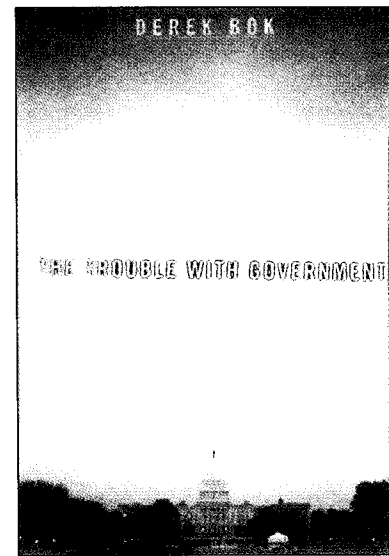
This tradition is embodied in our Constitution, which sets up a structure for a limited government. And this is not an efficient structure for the administrative state. Yet it is unlikely this structure will change. As Bok writes sarcastically, "To alter the Constitutional framework is to tamper with the sacred text." Not sacred to Derek Bok, apparently. In this book, the very word "sacred" has invisible quotation marks around it.

In another place, Bok writes, "Our expensive regulatory process can be viewed as a monument to the pervasive distrust of official action and the desire to protect citizens in any possible way from the arbitrary use of power. Unfortunately, the costs of maintaining the monument are far greater than those of a more informal, cooperative system."

A "monument"—a word used, like "sacred," to mock what other people revere. Bok respects these American traditions like he might respect his great aunt's evangelism.

Bok notes that America tried once during the twentieth century to construct a "collaborative, corporatist" system, under Franklin Roosevelt. Here was government lathered on so thick that the federal power undertook to determine the correct procedure for extracting a chicken from a coop. The Supreme Court, however, declared it unconstitutional.

Ah, the Constitution. That document again. Bok would pretty clearly like to amend it heavily, but saying so would be too un-mainstream. And that is the central problem with this book. The most engaging questions, like what the purpose and structure of the State ought to be, are not discussed. All that's left to argue are partic-



ular details, like campaign finance reform, regulatory revisions, and how to exhort more Americans to vote.

Bok favors more restrictions on how citizens may back political candidates. He allows, however, that "public subsidies, by themselves, would simply encourage more challengers to run for office." He ends up arguing for a ban on soft money and tighter rules on independent expenditures.

Bok favors regulatory reform, including cost-benefit analysis. He allows that the Superfund law is foolish legislation based on alarmist journalism. He supports the use of market forces in regulation, but notes that such systems still require government rules and officials to enforce them.

Bok thinks that too few poor people vote, and sees this as a big problem. If more poor people voted, they would get bigger welfare benefits, and maybe even "comprehensive social legislation." He is attracted to compulsory voting, but recognizes that Americans would never accept it.

He is also attracted to National Service. Bok finds the idea "all the more compelling now that the disappearance of the draft has removed one of the few opportunities to gather Americans from all walks of life in a common civic undertaking." But the unions wouldn't allow the national servers to do anything useful, and the libertarians would fight the compulsion part. The idea, he laments, is "premature."

He considers reforms of Congress. One idea he likes is voting for parties only, not candidates, so that no American could ever split his vote. Then the