

America's Second-Worst Dynasty

by H.A. Scott Trask

**America's First Dynasty:
The Adamses, 1735-1918**
by Richard Brookhiser
New York: The Free Press;
234 pp., \$25.00

Richard Brookhiser's biographical study of four generations of the Adams family illustrates once again that the rich and complex history of our country remains a closed book to the ruling class and their literary apologists. Brookhiser reveals in his introduction that his purpose is to create a usable past: "The United States is formally an egalitarian nation—The Declaration of Independence . . . states that all men are created equal."

John Quincy Adams, son of John Adams, was one of the most experienced men in foreign affairs ever to be elected president. He had served as minister to the Netherlands (1794-96), minister to Prussia (1797-1801), U.S. senator from Massachusetts (1804-1808), minister to Russia (1809-1814), peace commissioner and then minister to Great Britain (1814-1817), and secretary of state (1817-1825). Brookhiser attributes John Quincy's successful rise in government largely to John Adams' position and guidance, as well as to Quincy's native talents and intelligence. Quincy accompanied his father on two diplomatic missions to Europe, where he studied French and received personal tutoring from his father in the classics. Quincy learned French so well that, at the age of 14, he was sent to Moscow with an American diplomat to serve as his translator and secretary. He served as his father's secretary when John was minister to England. Brookhiser's point is that talents and intelligence can go unrealized without proper guidance and favorable circumstances. Hence, we should not be surprised or offended by the fact that fortunate families have persisted over generations in the political establishment of democratic America.

But Brookhiser neglects a third essential ingredient in John Quincy's rise to the presidency: his decision to leave the

Federalist Party, join the Republicans, serve Virginia presidents, and embrace Jeffersonian nationalism in opposition to the increasing sectionalism of his native region during the 1800's and 1810's. Quincy supported Jefferson's embargo in 1808 (losing his Senate seat as a result), supported James Madison for president the same year, supported the War of 1812, opposed the 1814 Hartford Convention, and served two terms as James Monroe's secretary of state. During this time, he was an ardent expansionist favoring the acquisition not only of Florida and Texas but of Canada, Cuba, and all of Mexico. Whatever his personal beliefs regarding slavery, he never took a public position against the peculiar institution nor joined with those of his section who opposed the admission of Missouri as a slave state in 1820.

In 1828, John Quincy became the second of the first six presidents to be defeated for reelection to the presidency, the first being his father. Such a defeat must have rankled the ambitious and proud son, just as it had his father in 1800. Furthermore, Quincy could not have overlooked or dismissed the fact that, in both of these defeats, the votes of the South had been decisive and the victorious candidate, a Southerner. As an added humiliation, Jackson, the man who defeated him, was reelected in 1832, continuing the tradition of popular two-term Southern presidents. It is hard to believe that Quincy did not feel betrayed or ill used by the South. How else does one explain his political transformation after his presidency into an anti-expansionist, antislavery, strongly sectionalist congressman from Massachusetts?

Brookhiser's explanation is that Adams' conscience and sense of family obligation to the egalitarian ideals of the Framers finally led him to an antislavery position. He writes that both Quincy and his son, Congressman Charles Francis Adams, were outraged that the Declaration of Independence "was now being interpreted as if it applied only to white men" and that Southerners, instead of taking steps gradually to abolish slavery as the Framers had predicted, were now defending it as a positive good.

Brookhiser is confused about who were the innovators and revolutionaries of the day and who were the traditionalists and conservatives. Many Northerners, as well as Southerners, were alarmed that the Declaration was now being reinterpreted by abolitionists as if it applied to

all men and (what was far more dangerous) that the preamble had come to have some standing in American law. Adams' argument in the *Amistad* case (that the inalienable rights mentioned in the Declaration guaranteed the Africans their freedom) placed ideology above law and was correctly disregarded by the justices in making their decision. The Court did, in fact, find the slaves to be free on the sound legal grounds that they had been shipped from Africa in violation of international law banning the slave trade.

Brookhiser errs in describing Charles Francis Adams as a "conservative." Charles belonged to the progressive wing of the Whig party, supported the radical South-hater and popular demagogue Charles Sumner over the conservative and gentlemanly Robert Winthrop for a U.S. Senate seat, favored statist economic policies (including a high tariff and a national bank), joined the first two purely sectional parties to appear in the United States (the Free Soil and Republican Parties), and consistently opposed political compromises designed to alleviate sectional tensions and preserve the union without war. Brookhiser can argue that these were morally correct positions if he wants to, but he cannot honestly argue that they were *conservative* ones.

Brookhiser has a tendency to make questionable assertions without any attempt to support them with historical facts or argument. For instance, he claims that "the United States could have won independence without French help." On another occasion, he asserts, without evidence, that Charles Adams' greatest service to his country was the role he played while minister to England, in dissuading that country from formally recognizing the Confederacy and intervening on its behalf. This is akin to declaring that Bill Clinton deserves credit for the economic boom of the 1990's simply because he was President at the time.

Throughout the book, Brookhiser betrays his background as a polemicist rather than an historian. He slanders President James Buchanan as "a gracious, gutless homosexual whose lame-duck cabinet was filled with traitors." He offers no evidence, argument, or historical authority to back up his assertion regarding Buchanan's sexuality. Nor does he do justice to Buchanan's constitutional principles. Buchanan—unlike Abraham Lincoln—had moral and patriotic scruples about inaugurating a bloody civil

war against his own countrymen. He did not believe that the federal government had the authority to coerce a state militarily, much less invade it to force it back into a political union from which it had formally seceded. The majority of Buchanan's Cabinet agreed and urged the President to evacuate Fort Sumter, as its continued occupation by Northern troops was an incitement to war. (This Cabinet was filled with such "traitors" as Caleb Cushing, the respected constitutional lawyer from Massachusetts, and Isaac Toucey, the former governor of Connecticut.)

Like the later Adamses, Richard Brookhiser not only equates secessionism with "disloyalty" and "treason" but reads it out of the American political tradition as a heresy or an expression of mental illness. He thus begs the question that lay at the heart of the war: Did states have an historical and constitutional right to withdraw from the Union? On his own evidence, the answer is yes: Brookhiser observes that "talk of disunion and disloyalty were [*sic*] not uncommon in the early republic," by which he means that many people of that period believed that their states could legally withdraw from the confederation. He even mentions Gouverneur Morris, one of the Framers of the Constitution, "scornfully call[ing]" for "the secession of the north" some 25 years after the federal union was formed. But Brookhiser simply dismisses him as a "peg-legged aristocrat."

Henry—the historian and son of Charles—is the fourth member of the Adams dynasty considered by Brookhiser. He quotes a revealing statement by young Henry before the outbreak of the war, intimating that the South must be "put . . . in the wrong." If the garrison at Fort Sumter "were all murdered in cold blood, it would be an excellent thing for the country, much as I should regret it on the part of those individuals." There were many in the North for whom revenging Fort Sumter was merely a pretext for crushing the South. Murder begins in the heart; it is the same with war.

Why did Brookhiser decided to write yet another book about the Adamses? They are hardly neglected figures in American historiography. Coming right after David McCulloch's biography of John Adams and C. Bradley Thompson's study of his political thought, Brookhiser's book amounts to overkill. Perhaps the answer lies in the affinity between the Adamses and the neoconservatives. The

former held all the fashionable positions of their time (they were political centralists, neomercantilists, and anti-Southern), hardly inspiring most today to question their fundamental political assumptions. What is more, they represent that fraudulent form of Northern conservatism that never really conserves anything but simply tags along to ratify the latest triumph of radicalism.

New England had plenty of genuine conservatives during the 19th century about whom Brookhiser could have written, if he were so inclined: Nathaniel Hawthorne, Franklin Pierce, Rufus Choate, George Ticknor. These, however, were men who would have nothing to do with the Adamses, whom they regarded as ambitious and unprincipled opportunists with a radical streak in their makeup. There were Northerners during this period who were state particularists, Jeffersonian constitutionalists, classical liberals, Peace Democrats, and even a few who defended slavery. However, since writing about them would reveal a broader American tradition—or traditions—incompatible with the American social-democratic empire, perhaps Richard Brookhiser thought it best to ignore them. In this, he certainly succeeds.

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Hobbes Lite

by Jeremy Lott

Warrior Politics: How Leadership Demands a Pagan Ethos

by Robert D. Kaplan
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198 pp., \$22.95



Some writers, by dint of hard work, luck, mock outrageousness, and an acute instinct for the acceptable limits of dissent, are able to rise to the prized status of Tellers of Truth. Unlike Orwell—who was a *bona fide* secular prophet and, therefore, ignored—they are rewarded in their lifetimes with brisk-selling books, access to important media outlets, lucrative lectures, and buzz—lots and lots of

buzz. Of this phenomenon, Robert Kaplan could stand as Exhibit A. His new book, *Warrior Politics: Why Leadership Demands a Pagan Ethos*, is blurbed by three titans of industry and finance, two former secretaries of state, a former national security advisor, Newt Gingrich, and John Gray of the London School of Economics. The monumental fuss is over a very short essay on foreign policy that makes precious few concrete recommendations. Without the bibliography, endnotes, and the like, it amounts to an anemic 155 pages. In fact—and this may explain the businessmen's enthusiasm—the table of contents contains executive summaries of each of the chapters, allowing the gist of the book to be absorbed in just under two minutes. My late grandfather, a union man, would have called that not bad work, if you can get it.

Still, the meager literary merits of *Warrior Politics* by no means render the book worthless. Rather, its warm reception tells us a good deal about what a great many of our betters think about the future—and, therefore, about us. Completed before September 11—and, so far as I can tell, not reworked in response to those events—Kaplan's book seeks to limn all of the relevant issues confronting American rulers and strategists in the 21st century. To this task, Kaplan brings a particular point of view. "I am," he says, "not an optimist or an idealist"—unlike most Americans, who

can afford optimism partly because their institutions, including the Constitution, were conceived by men who thought tragically. Before the first president was sworn in, the rules of impeachment were established. . . . Our separation of powers is based on that grim view of human behavior.

Robert Kaplan is on the left wing of what might be called the "realist" school of foreign policy; he argues that progress—small "p"—is not assured and that, in light of the century now behind us, regress is a distinct possibility. For instance, the benefits of technology, though real, are oversold and distributed unevenly: By 2010, "[O]f the 70 percent of the world still not connected [to the internet] . . . about half will never have made a phone call." (*Horribile dictu!*) Kaplan believes that the United States, ideally, should promote "human rights" but doubts the ability of democracy to ac-