

Topic Page: [Adams, John Quincy, 1767-1848](#)

Definition: **Adams, John Quincy** from *Philip's Encyclopedia*

Sixth US president (1825-29), son of the second president John Adams. He served in his father's administration, before acting (1803-08) as a Federalist Party member in the US Senate. Adams was secretary of state (1817-24) for James Monroe. He was largely responsible for formulating the Monroe Doctrine and negotiating the Adams-Onís Treaty (1819). Adams became president without a majority, his appointment confirmed by the House of Representatives. His lack of a mandate and non-partisan approach led to his electoral defeat by Andrew [Jackson](#). He served in the House of Representatives (1830-48).



Image from: [As a U.S. congressman, John Quincy Adams led... in *Encyclopedia of Emancipation and Abolition in the Transatlantic World*](#)

Summary Article: **ADAMS, JOHN QUINCY**
From *Encyclopedia of U.S. Political History*

1767-1848

Sixth President of the United States

The political career of John Quincy Adams spanned 70 years, from the American Revolution to the Mexican War. A foundational figure in American foreign policy, Adams represented the U.S. government as minister plenipotentiary to the Netherlands, Prussia, Russia, and Great Britain; helped negotiate the end of the War of 1812; and was the chief architect of the

Monroe Doctrine. As secretary of state he extended the nation's borders to the Pacific Ocean with the Transcontinental Treaty of 1819, but in his later years as president and in Congress, he sought to contain the forces that territorial expansion had unleashed on the United States, particularly the spread of slavery. Exceptionally brilliant and eternally stubborn, Adams was a politician without a party, a man who refused to countenance any course of action he did not fully support. He both aggravated friends and surprised enemies with his overwhelming desire to always act in what he thought was the nation's best interest.

The Education of John Quincy Adams

John Quincy Adams was born on July 11, 1767, the son of Abigail Smith Adams and the future president John Adams. When he was 11 years old, John Quincy accompanied his father to Europe on diplomatic missions for the Continental Congress, making him the first American to be apprenticed as a diplomat in the European tradition. Along the way, John Quincy was enrolled in schools in Paris and Amsterdam.

In July 1781, at the age of 14, he accompanied Francis Dana, a Massachusetts diplomat and friend of John Adams, to St. Petersburg, acting as Dana's translator. The mission was a failure, but it allowed John Quincy to learn German (he already knew French, Greek, and Latin) and gave him further exposure to the diplomatic profession. In 1784, when John Adams became the first American minister plenipotentiary to Great Britain, John Quincy returned from Russia to become his father's secretary in London. After one year, he left for America to enroll in Harvard, graduating in 1787, second in his class.

After being admitted to the Massachusetts bar in 1791, John Quincy practiced law for three years and began to write strident political essays for publication. The most famous of these were those that

made up his "Letters of Publicola," which attacked Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man* and its unqualified support of the rapidly radicalizing French Revolution. He also wrote under the noms de plume "Marcellus" and "Columbus" (1793) in defending George Washington's decision to request the French minister Edmond Genêt's removal from the United States. Washington, impressed by Adams's intellect, appointed him to be the American minister plenipotentiary to the Netherlands on May 30, 1794.

Early Diplomatic Career

At the Hague, Adams was meant to oversee the repayment of America's war debt. The American Revolution had been primarily funded by the French monarchy and loans from Dutch bankers in Amsterdam. However, the system of repayment broke down when the French Revolutionary army invaded the Netherlands in 1795. With his primary mission gone, Adams turned to writing informed and insightful reports on the war in Europe and its probable impact on American trade and foreign policy goals. As the war escalated, Adams became convinced that the United States needed to stay out of European politics and the complicated alliance systems that were pulling more and more nations into the conflict. His thoughts mirrored George Washington's own assessment of the situation, and Adams's phrasing was echoed in Washington's Farewell Address, the canonic statement of American neutrality. In 1796, Washington appointed Adams minister to Portugal.

In 1797, the incoming president, John Adams, appointed his son the first American minister to Prussia. In Berlin, John Quincy was charged with negotiating a new Treaty of Amity and Commerce. The original treaty had been negotiated by Benjamin Franklin in 1785, and it was one of the most liberal treaties the United States ever signed regarding the rights of neutral shipping. With France and Great Britain at war once again, neutral shipping was under attack, and the new treaty could not afford to promise rights that would not be respected by those two powerful nations. John Quincy and his Prussian counterparts cut the most problematic clauses from the 1785 treaty, including the statement that "free ships make free goods," in deference to the changed political climate, forgoing several of their rights as neutrals in exchange for greater protection on the high seas.

While in Prussia, John Quincy Adams wrote regular dispatches to his father regarding the political and economic state of Europe. These dispatches became extremely important during the undeclared naval war with France known as the Quasi-War and its related diplomatic fiasco, the XYZ Affair of 1797-1798. Through his contacts in Europe, John Quincy was able to tell Pres. John Adams that the French foreign minister, Charles Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord, regretted his attempts to extract bribes from an earlier peace mission (the XYZ Affair) and now wanted the undeclared naval war brought to a swift and peaceful conclusion. John Adams's subsequent decision to make peace with France split the Federalist Party and ensured his loss to Thomas Jefferson in the election of 1800. Rather than put his son's career at the mercy of his former friend, President Adams recalled John Quincy to the United States.

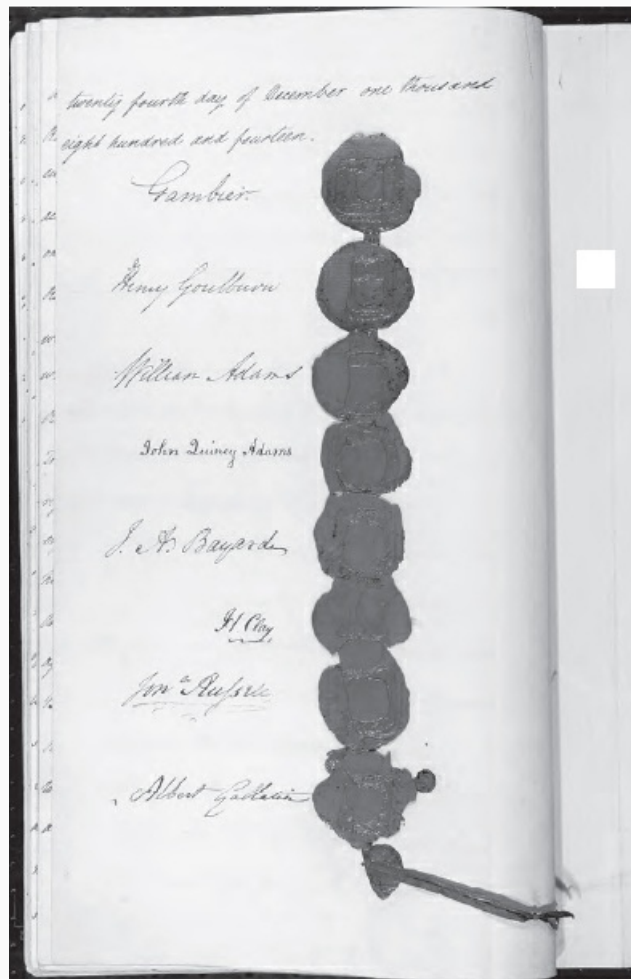
Senator

Back in Massachusetts after seven years abroad, John Quincy Adams resumed his legal career for two years. He was then elected to the Massachusetts state senate in 1802. His first year was undistinguished, but in 1803 he was appointed to the U.S. Senate by his Federalist colleagues.

Like his father before him, John Quincy Adams considered himself a representative of the entire country, not just Massachusetts or the Federalist Party, and free to support whoever he thought had the best proposal at the time, often infuriating those who had counted on his being a loyal partisan.

Adams arrived in Washington, D.C., just after the Senate had accepted the Louisiana Purchase, nearly doubling the size of the country and giving the American government control over the Mississippi River and the Port of New Orleans. The decision had been bitterly opposed by the Federalists, but Adams broke with his party by supporting the project. He considered territorial expansion the only way to protect the nation from breaking along an East-West axis. With the Mississippi firmly in American hands, Western farmers could get their crops to the Gulf of Mexico without needing permission from the Spanish Crown. At the same time, Adams frustrated the Jefferson administration by calling for a constitutional amendment to make the Louisiana Purchase legal.

As the Napoleonic Wars escalated, the British seizure of American ships and impressment of American sailors into the Royal Navy increased dramatically. Jefferson's solution to this problem was the Embargo Act of 1807, which placed a ban on American exports, thereby cutting off American trade with all its international partners. Adams voted for the embargo because he saw it as a temporary measure that could be deployed tactically to threaten Great Britain into respecting the rights of neutral shipping. That vote (as well as Adams's presence at several Republican rallies protesting British actions on the high seas) pushed the Massachusetts Federalists to select his successor months before Adams's term was due to expire. Adams resigned his Senate seat at once.



Pictured here is the last page of the Treaty of Ghent with John Quincy Adams's signature. Adams was the head of a peace commission tasked with negotiating an end to the War of 1812 between the United States and Great Britain. The treaty called for a return to the antebellum status quo and is considered an important diplomatic achievement for Adams. (Bettmann/Corbis)

Later Diplomatic Career

In 1809, Pres. James Madison appointed Adams minister plenipotentiary to Russia. He set sail in August, almost 30 years after Catherine the Great had refused to recognize Francis Dana's mission during the American Revolution. Once more in the diplomatic corps, he resumed writing detailed and thoughtful reports on the state of European affairs and their impact on the United States. He also worked with Czar Nicholas I to relax the restrictions placed on neutral trade in the Napoleonic Wars (1802-1815). Adams was in Russia for Napoleon's invasion in 1812 and subsequent retreat, and he accurately predicted that the Russian scorched-earth policy would defeat the French army. When Congress declared war on Great Britain in 1812, Adams used his influence to secure an offer of Russian mediation to end the war. Adams would have headed this mediation effort, but Great Britain refused the czar's proposal.

In January 1814, Adams was appointed head of the peace commission charged with negotiating an end to the War of 1812. The war between the United States and Great Britain had begun while the British army and navy were fully occupied fighting Napoleon. However, the French emperor's defeat in 1814 saw the transfer of hardened veterans to the American theater, resulting in the burning of Washington, D.C. The Treaty of Ghent (signed December 24, 1814) called for a return to the status quo ante bellum. While this meant that the United States did not gain any territory or concessions from the British, the nation did not lose anything either, which was considered a significant diplomatic achievement, given the course of the war.

Following his work in Ghent, Adams was appointed minister plenipotentiary to Great Britain, where he served from 1815 to 1817. His principal achievement was to negotiate the Convention of 1815, a preliminary economic accord between the two nations that allowed for greater liberality of trade between American and British Isles ports (later finalized in the Convention of 1818). However, the British government still refused to relax its restrictions on the far more lucrative American trade with British colonial ports.

Secretary of State

On March 6, 1817, Pres. James Monroe appointed John Quincy Adams as his secretary of state. Adams was sworn in on September 22 and is traditionally considered America's greatest secretary of state. He began by reorganizing the State Department. He ordered an overhaul of the filing system, established a library, and required all diplomats and consuls to submit (as he had) regular, numbered dispatches informing the government of all newsworthy events in their geographic area. He also established a language training program that sent young men who had shown great aptitude in ancient Greek to be clerks for consuls, paid for their books, and gave them free time to study local languages. Finally, he wrote the first set of detailed instructions for every level of overseas post, creating a uniform standard of conduct and a consistency in job descriptions for foreign service officers worldwide.

Adams oversaw the ratification of the convention of 1818 with Great Britain, which he had helped negotiate as minister three years earlier. The convention set the border between Western Canada and the United States (from the Lake of the Woods to the Rocky Mountains) at the 49th parallel, and the British government agreed to a "joint occupation" of the Oregon Country. The Russian government was opposed to this joint occupation, but Adams persuaded them to withdraw their claims to the Oregon Country below the 54°40' parallel.

The most important treaty negotiated by Adams as secretary of state was the Transcontinental Treaty of 1819 (or the Adams-Onís Treaty) with Spain, by which the United States acquired the Florida peninsula and established the boundary with New Spain at the 42nd parallel, from north of the Arkansas River to the Pacific coast. Adams did not press for American control over Texas, an issue that would later inflame American politics, but set the eastern border of New Spain at the Sabine River. The Florida peninsula and Gulf Coast had been an object of American foreign policy since the Louisiana Purchase. When Adams began his negotiations with the Spanish minister, however, Spain refused to cede the territory to the United States. In 1818, Gen. Andrew Jackson invaded Florida, capturing St. Marks and Pensacola, and in the process revealed Spain's inability to control or defend the territory. Adams argued against punishing Jackson for his unauthorized invasion of Spanish territory and used the military advantage to press the Spanish minister into making greater territorial concessions.

Adams was the principal architect of the Monroe Doctrine, which helped to establish a new role for the United States in the American hemisphere. In March 1822, President Monroe recognized five new republics in South and Latin America and began establishing American embassies in each of them—thus doubling the number of American diplomatic posts in the first major expansion of the diplomatic corps. With the breakup of the Spanish Empire, the new Latin and South American republics became fodder for intrigue and proxy wars between the European powers. When Great Britain approached the Monroe administration with a joint statement against European interference in the Americas, Adams was the sole voice of dissent in Monroe's Cabinet and among his advisors (including Thomas Jefferson and James Madison). Adams was concerned that a joint statement with Great Britain would endanger American sovereignty and limit its diplomatic options. He convinced Monroe that the United States could make the proclamation on its own and still receive British support. Adams helped draft the relevant paragraphs of Monroe's annual message to Congress (given December 3, 1823), which called for a halt to additional European involvement in the Americas and pledged the United States to repulse any future efforts. The Monroe Doctrine became the cornerstone for American foreign policy regarding Latin and South America and paved the way for American ministers to attend the first Pan-American Conference, held in Panama in 1826.

President

In 1824, Adams sought the presidency of the United States. As secretary of state he was considered Monroe's heir apparent, but the rise of Andrew Jackson and the emergence of pluralistic politics were changing the landscape of American politics. Although Jackson won a plurality of the popular and Electoral College vote, no candidate won a majority. When Henry Clay, who came in fourth, realized he would not win the presidency, he chose to support Adams (whose views on policy mirrored his own). Adams won the election on the first ballot in the House of Representatives. When Adams later appointed Clay as his secretary of state, Jackson's supporters claimed the two men had made a "corrupt bargain" to defraud Jackson of the presidency. In fact, Clay never would have supported Jackson—their views on government and policy were violently opposed to each other—and when Adams created a Cabinet composed of the men from all regions of the United States, he could hardly have left Clay (the great champion of Western interests) out.

Despite his narrow victory, Adams attempted to launch a massive new system of internal improvements and public education, including a national university and a national observatory. Earlier in his public career, Adams had believed that territorial expansion would provide a sufficient escape valve for the tensions that threatened the American nation. New land and greater opportunities, he believed,

would remove the concerns of Western farmers and increase national prosperity. However, the Missouri Crisis of 1820 changed his mind. The outcry over expanding slavery and the violence of its defense shocked Adams into recognizing the threat of sectional tensions between an increasingly free-labor, industrial North and a slaveholding, agrarian South. Adams wanted to knit the Union into a single economic market with new roads and canals, while the expanded educational and scientific offerings of the federal government would expand the minds and possibilities of the citizenry.

Adams's plan failed. A great deal of money was appropriated for building projects, and more roads and canals were financed than in any previous administration, but the projects were designed for purely local benefit and did not connect with one another in any meaningful way. The rise of Jacksonian democracy saw an intense turn toward the defense of local or sectional interests and away from projects of a national or continental scope. This conflict came to a head over the 1828 tariff designed to pay for improvements and protect domestic industry, seen in the South and the West as a transfer of wealth to the North and called the "Tariff of Abominations" by its detractors, touching off the Nullification Crisis, in which several state governments attempted to nullify the tariff and thereby assert their authority over the federal government. Jackson and his followers were also furious over his loss in the 1824 election, and they blocked Adams's proposals at every turn, as much for personal revenge as political differences.

Adams's presidency also failed to produce any major foreign policy successes. In his eight years as secretary of state, Adams had already solved all the major foreign policy questions the European powers were willing to negotiate. He continued to push for greater reciprocity and liberality in American trade, particularly with Great Britain, but to no avail.

After four years of campaigning, Jackson won the election of 1828 in a landslide, making Adams the second president to lose a bid for reelection (the first being his father). John Quincy Adams returned home to Massachusetts intending to spend the rest of his life in retirement, as had George Washington and the other four preceding presidents.

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Congressman

Adams had been in retirement for less than a year when he was nominated to represent the Plymouth District of Massachusetts in the U.S. House of Representatives. He won in a landslide and returned to Washington. He would be elected every two years until his death in 1848, one of the few politicians in his time who could claim a safe seat in Congress. As he had during his time in the Senate, more than 20 years earlier, Adams refused to consider himself a member of any political party, even supporting Andrew Jackson when Adams believed his longtime rival was in the right. As a congressman, Adams enjoyed a freedom of conscience he had never before experienced in public office. Representing his

friends and neighbors freed him from the need to compromise his political principles.

Adams also continued to champion the cause of a national university and observatory. Although neither was ever established, he did chair the committee established in 1835 to disburse the over \$500,000 bequest of James Smithson, a British scientist, for the "increase and diffusion" of knowledge in the United States. Though the money had many political claimants, Adams was able to keep the bequest intact until it was finally used to create the Smithsonian Institution in 1846.

Adams also led the fight against the "gag rule" (1836), which prohibited congressmen from introducing petitions calling for the abolition of slavery. Adams initially took up this challenge to defend the Amendment I right to petition the government, despite his concern over abolitionism and the threat it posed to the American Union. Over time, Adams came to change his position on slavery, and by the end of his life considered himself an abolitionist, committed to ending slavery in the United States.

Continuing his concern over the spread of slavery, Adams fought against the annexation of Texas in 1836 and the possibility of a war with Mexico to acquire the breakaway Mexican province. Adams considered the annexation of Texas to be of particular moral importance, not only because it would have been stealing land from an adjacent neighbor without due compensation, but because Mexico had outlawed slavery before Texas declared its independence. If Texas were brought into the American Union, slavery would be reestablished there.

In his last years in Congress, Adams saw the gag rule repealed in 1844, and defended the Africans who had risen against their captors on the *Amistad*, winning their freedom before the U.S. Supreme Court in 1841. His fight against the annexation of Texas failed in 1846, and he unsuccessfully argued against the Mexican-American War. His principled, unyielding stances brought him the greatest popularity he had ever known, especially from abolitionists, who called him "Old Man Eloquent" and flooded his office with petitions to present in Congress. But he also experienced the deepest enmity of his career, as slave owners barraged him with hate mail and death threats addressed to the "Madman of Massachusetts."

Death and Legacy

John Quincy Adams died in the U.S. Capitol on February 23, 1848, after suffering a stroke two days earlier in the House of Representatives. As he lay dying, the House, Senate, and Supreme Court all shut down. His death was considered the final passing of the Revolutionary generation, commemorated by friends and foes alike as a turning point in the history of the nation. At the end of his life, Adams had come to see a civil war as inevitable, accurately predicting that should the nation go to war with itself, the president could use his war powers to end slavery forever.

Over his life and career, Adams helped create the antebellum United States, with its vast sweep of contested territory and its relative freedom from European interference. His plan for a national market and educational system to bind together this large territory failed, not to be attempted again for almost a hundred years. Though he initially refused to alter the delicate political balance between slave and free states, he eventually came to embrace the cause of abolition, seeing slavery as the issue that would, and perhaps even should, break the Union he had served for over 60 years.

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