

Letter

to
John Adams

Abigail Adams



This 1775 British cartoon ridicules a group of North Carolina women who, in support of the patriot cause, signed a pledge not to drink tea. Courtesy of the State Department of Cultural Resources, Division of Archives and History, Raleigh, North Carolina.

Braintree, 7 May, 1776.

How many are the solitary hours I spend, ruminating upon the past, and anticipating the future, whilst you, overwhelmed with the cares of state, have but a few moments you can devote to any individual. All domestic pleasures and enjoyments are absorbed in the great and important duty you owe your country, “for our country is, as it were, a secondary god, and the first and greatest parent. It is to be preferred to parents, wives, children, friends, and all things, the gods only excepted; for, if our country perishes, it is as impossible to save an individual, as to preserve one of the fingers of a mortified¹ hand.” Thus do I suppress every wish, and silence every murmur, acquiescing in a painful

separation from the companion of my youth, and the friend of my heart.

I believe ’t is near ten days since I wrote you a line. I have not felt in a humor to entertain you if I had taken up my pen. Perhaps some unbecoming invective² might have fallen from it. The eyes of our rulers have been closed, and a lethargy has seized almost every member. I fear a fatal security has taken possession of them. Whilst the building is in flames, they tremble at the expense of water to quench it. In short, two months have elapsed since the evacuation of

1. mortified: decayed; having gangrene.
2. invective: abusive language.

WORDS
TO
KNOW

ruminating (rōō'mə-nā-tīng) *adj.* turning a matter over and over in the mind
ruminate *v.*

acquiescing (ăk'wē-ēs'īng) *adj.* consenting passively or without protest
acquiesce *v.*

lethargy (lēth'ər-jē) *n.* a state of sluggishness and inactivity

Boston,³ and very little has been done in that time to secure it, or the harbor, from future invasion. The people are all in a flame, and no one among us, that I have heard of, even mentions expense. They think, universally, that there has been an amazing neglect somewhere. Many have turned out as volunteers to work upon Noddle's Island, and many more would go upon Nantasket, if the business was once set on foot. "T is a maxim of state,⁴ that power and liberty are like heat and moisture. Where they are well mixed, every thing prospers; where they are single, they are destructive."

A government of more stability is much wanted in this colony, and they are ready to receive it from the hands of the Congress. And since I have begun with maxims of state, I will add another, namely, that a people may let a king⁵ fall, yet still remain a people; but, if a king let his people slip from him, he is no longer a king. And as this is most certainly our case, why not proclaim to the world, in decisive terms, your own importance?

Shall we not be despised by foreign powers, for hesitating so long at a word?

I cannot say that I think you are very generous to the ladies; for, whilst you are proclaiming peace and good-will to men, emancipating all nations, you insist upon retaining an absolute power over wives. But you must remember, that arbitrary power is like most other things which are very hard, very liable to be broken; and, notwithstanding all your wise laws and maxims, we have it in our power, not only to free ourselves, but to subdue our masters, and, without violence, throw both your natural and legal authority at our feet;—

"Charm by accepting, by submitting sway,
Yet have our humor most when we obey."⁶

I thank you for several letters which I have received since I wrote last; they alleviate a tedious absence, and I long earnestly for a Saturday evening, and experience a similar pleasure to that which I used to find in the return of my friend upon that day after a week's absence. The idea of a year dissolves all my philosophy.

Our little ones, whom you so often recommend to my care and instruction, shall not be deficient in virtue or probity, if the precepts of a mother have their desired effect; but they would be doubly enforced, could they be indulged with the example of a father alternately before them. I often point them to their sire,

"engaged in a corrupted state,
Wrestling with vice and faction."⁷

A Adams

3. two months . . . Boston: British troops under General William Howe and more than a thousand Loyalists evacuated Boston on March 17, 1776.
4. maxim of state: rule or short saying related to government.
5. king: Adams is referring to the British king George III, who ignored colonists' protests and put Massachusetts under military rule.
6. "Charm . . . obey": a couplet taken from Alexander Pope's poem *Moral Essays*.
7. vice and faction: corruption and conflict within a nation.

WORDS **emancipate** (ĭ-măn'sə-păt') v. to free; liberate
TO **probity** (prō'bĭ-tè) n. honesty, integrity
KNOW **precept** (prē'sèpt') n. a rule or principle prescribing a particular course of action