

John Adams, Thomas Pownall and Peace in 1780

By Gregg L. Lint

John Adams visited England for the first time in the Fall of 1783. The Definitive Anglo-American Peace Treaty had been signed and, having recently been ill, Adams contemplated sampling the waters at Bath. In November he made his first excursion outside London to visit Thomas Pownall at his Richmond Hill residence.¹ The two men spent the day together and Pownall later presented Adams with his two volume *Administration of the Colonies* (London, 1765), which is in John Adams' library today. It is inscribed "Govr Pownall presents as a Testimony of his Esteem & Respect this Copy of the following work to Mr. Adams."² Why would John Adams make a special effort to visit Thomas Pownall, a figure of some prominence in his day but notably obscure in our own? The answer lies in 1780 when John Adams arrived in Europe to negotiate the Anglo-American peace and Pownall published *A Memorial to the Sovereigns of Europe, on the Present State of Affairs, Between the Old and the New World* (London, 1780).

John Adams arrived at Paris in early February 1780. He was commissioned by Congress to negotiate Anglo-American treaties of peace and commerce, but it was an inauspicious time for such an undertaking. The war in America and Europe was stalemated, the Dutch had just joined Britain's list of enemies, and the Spanish Navy had suffered defeat at the hands defeated by Adm. Rodney. France saw Adams's very presence in Europe on such a mission as the product of an ill-conceived policy that could only undermine the Franco-American alliance and make its war aims more difficult to achieve. Britain saw no reason to negotiate with its rebellious subjects when to do so

would mean the loss of its American empire and with it a permanent and catastrophic decline in British economic and political power.

John Adams was undeterred. He had been charged with an important mission and he was determined to carry it out. To some degree this was because his situation was different than on his first mission to Europe in 1778 and 1779. Then he had been sent to replace Silas Deane as one of the three American commissioners—Benjamin Franklin and Arthur Lee being the others—assigned the task of negotiating a Franco-American treaty. In 1780, however, Adams was poised to strike out on his own, unconstrained by any need to seek consensus or compromise with colleagues who might or might not share his view of the proper course for American diplomatic efforts in Europe.

Moreover, his instructions for negotiating the treaties left him considerable freedom of action. The only binding requirements for the peace were that Britain negotiate “with the United States as sovereign, free And independent” and agree to a western boundary on the Mississippi River. Adams was not explicitly required to consult with and keep the French government informed of his activities. In matters not dealt with in his instructions he was to be governed by the 1778 Franco-American Alliance and French advice, but most importantly “*by your Knowledge of our Interests, and by your own discretion, in which We repose the fullest Confidence.*”³ With regard to the commercial treaty, he was to be guided by the Franco-American Treaty of Amity and Commerce, only fishing rights on the banks of Newfoundland constituted an ultimata. In everything else he was directed “to govern yourself by your own discretion as shall be most for the Interest of these States.”⁴ With such instructions, Adams’ mission was

pregnant with possibilities, particularly in the hands of a man that time and distance put beyond Congress' effective control and whom the French did not trust.

John Adams waited almost two months at his rooms at the Hotel de Valois on the Rue de Richelieu for something to happen. He had been told by told in February by the French foreign minister, the Comte de Vergennes, that he should take no steps to officially announce his mission, particularly regarding a commercial treaty.⁵ But Adams expected that when his presentation to Louis XVI in March was announced in the *Gazette de France* it would be accompanied by an official notice of the purpose of his presence in France. To his chagrin he found that such would not be the case. Vergennes informed him that a brief notice would appear in an unofficial foreign ministry publication, the *Mercur de France*. The substance of the item would be that "Mr. Adams, whom the Congress of the United States of America has appointed to participate in the peace conferences whenever they may occur, arrived here sometime ago and has had the honor of being presented to the King and the royal family." Well aware of the danger, or at least the distraction, that Adams posed, Vergennes indicated that the American could insert notices along the same lines in foreign newspapers.⁶ Adams ostensibly deferred to Vergennes, but not without serious reservations. He wrote to Congress that "I ought to confess that the Delicacies of the Comte de Vergennes about communicating my Powers, are not perfectly consonant to my manner of thinking: and if I had followed my own Judgment, I should have pursued a bolder Plan."⁷

From John Adams' point of view the situation in which he found himself was intolerable. To abide by Vergennes' admonitions regarding the disclosure of his mission meant that he was in Europe on the most important mission ever assigned to an American

diplomat, but with nothing to do. Moreover, the vital interest of the United States in at least exploring the possibilities of obtaining a satisfactory peace was being subordinated to the dictates of French policy. For Adams' it was clear evidence, if there had ever been any doubt, that for France the United States was the junior member of the Franco-American Alliance. It was a situation that rankled Adams and was one of the reasons why he had always had reservations about that treaty.

But Adams was not one to accept such a turn of events without attempting to do something about it. This was not because he was unfamiliar with diplomatic practice or the law of nations. He had spent 1778 and 1779 in Europe observing how Europeans played the diplomatic game and meeting the players, most notably the Comte de Vergennes. He was assembling the works intended to guide a diplomat in practicing his profession such as Jean Dumont's *Corps universel diplomatique* and Jean Rousset de Missy's *Recueil historique d'actes, négociations, mémoires, et traitéz*. And his library was replete with the works by the authorities on the law of nations: Hugo Grotius, Samuel Puffendorf, Emerich de Vattel, Christian Wolff, and others; which Adams had cited in his early efforts to justify American resistance to Parliament's authority over the colonies or, in his mind, its violation of the nascent sovereignty of a nation state.

For Adams, however, the rules and the law were secondary to the great object within his sights. He and his fellow American diplomats were practicing diplomacy in extraordinary times. Their success and possibly the survival of the new nation demanded that their efforts not be restricted by arbitrary rules that might suit an established power, but prove fatal the infant state rising in the New World. And it was from that vantage point that Adams evaluated the obstacles he faced and the most effective means to

overcome them. Believing for the most part that “the whole Corps diplomatick . . . are but a Company of Grannys,”⁸ he determined on another course. Of himself and his colleagues he would later write “your Veterans in Diplomaticks and in Affairs of State consider Us a kind of Militia and hold Us perhaps, as is natural,, in some degree of Contempt, but Wise Men know that Militia sometimes gain Victories over regular Troops, even by departing from the Rules.”⁹

So it was that three days after assuring the Comte de Vergennes of his acquiescence in the foreign minister’s position regarding his mission, John Adams wrote to his friend Edmund Jenings who knew people in London willing to publish items favorable to the United States. Adams declared that “I now think myself at Liberty to inform you that I have indeed the Honour, to be a Minister plenipotentiary from the United States of America.” Adams quoted from his commission and asked Jenings to “take Measures, to have some Paragraphs inserted in the English Newspapers, announcing the Purport of my Mission.”¹⁰ The “Paragraphs” soon appeared in the London newspapers and while Adams was not named as their source, there could have been little doubt among officialdom in Paris or London that he was responsible.¹¹ Two weeks later Adams sent Jenings an account of his arrival in and journey through Spain, emphasizing the attention he had received from Spanish officials, all of which “was intended to manifest to America and to the World, the Benevolence of Spain towards the United States.”¹² Jenings again was successful in obtaining the item’s publication.¹³ It was in the midst of these efforts, undertaken more to do something rather than remaining passive and invisible, that John Adams received Thomas Pownall’s *Memorial*.¹⁴

John Adams and Thomas Pownall are an odd pair. Adams was a Massachusetts lawyer, whose writings set down the ideological justification for the American Revolution. Pownall was a former royal governor of Massachusetts known for his 1765 treatise on the more efficient administration of the American colonies. But no book in John Adams' library exerted more influence over Adams the diplomat than did Thomas Pownall's *A Memorial to the Sovereigns of Europe, on the Present State of Affairs, Between the Old and the New World*. Indeed, Adams thought so much of the *Memorial* that he turned it to his own purposes and, after making extensive revisions, published it in 1781 as *A Translation of the Memorial to the Sovereigns of Europe upon the Present State of Affairs Between the Old and New World into Common Sense and Intelligible English*. Adams believed the alterations to be necessary because because Pownall's pamphlet contained "so many quaint Words, and dark Expressions, intermixed with So many good Thoughts and So much Knowledge of America that it seems worth translating."¹⁵

Historians and Adams' biographers have largely ignored the *Memorial*, the *Translation*, and the relationship between Adams and Pownall. To some degree this is because access to or knowledge of the documents was limited. Neither of the two versions of the *Translation* prepared by Adams, one for Congress the other for publication, appeared in either Charles Francis Adams' *Works of John Adams* or in Francis Wharton's *Diplomatic Correspondence of the American Revolution*. Adding to the confusion was the attribution of the *Translation* to Edmund Jenings, who obtained its publication in London, or, most disturbingly from Adams' point of view, to Benjamin Franklin. Moreover, the French edition of the *Translation*, *Pensées sur la révolution de*

l'Amérique-Unie, that appeared at Amsterdam later in 1780 was seen as just another edition of the *Memorial* and, therefore, ascribed to Thomas Pownall.

But the *Memorial* deserves attention because its effect on John Adams was profound and lasting. It reached Adams at a particularly important stage of his diplomatic career and served as a catalyst that brought together the diverse threads of his thinking over a long period of time to create a coherent theoretical framework for the foreign policy of the United States. There are no better sources for understanding John Adams' views of American foreign policy and the place of the United States in the world than Pownall's *Memorial* and Adams' *Translation* of it. This is so from the date of his first efforts at diplomacy through his presidency.

That John Adams would be receptive to the views of Thomas Pownall may seem curious in view of Pownall's career and previous writings. He served as royal governor of Massachusetts from 1757 to 1760, and Adams remembered him as "a friend to liberty and to our constitution," averse "to all plots against either."¹⁶ Indeed, as he was sending off his *Translation* of Pownall's *Memorial* to Edmund Jenings for publication, Adams went further, declaring that "if all American Governors had been like Pownall, this War would not have existed."¹⁷ But Pownall never supported the view, increasingly held by Americans after 1763 and which informed much of Adams' pre-Revolutionary writings, that the American colonies were no longer subject to the rule of Parliament or that they deserved a special status within the empire. Rather he had always staunchly defended the colonial system and the Navigation Acts and never wavered from his view that the American colonies existed solely for the economic benefit of the mother country. In pursuance of that maxim Pownall had written in 1764 what he then saw as his

masterwork, *The Administration of the Colonies*. Pownall drew on his experience at the 1754 Albany Congress and as a colonial administrator and aimed to provide the British government and its colonial officials with a guide to the most efficient administration of the American colonies. He believed that a change in strategy was necessary if Britain was to harness the colonies' growing economic power for the benefit of the empire. In later years Pownall opposed the increasingly coercive measures taken by the London authorities against the American colonies, but he also consistently rejected American independence as a solution and supported efforts to return them to the imperial fold.

The *Memorial*, however, marked a dramatic change in Pownall's outlook. As in the *Administration*, upon which the *Memorial* was based, the ex-governor emphasized the growing economic importance of America and the need for Britain to take full advantage of the opportunities presenting themselves. But unlike *Administration*, in which he advocated more efficient management and control as the best means to achieve that goal, in the *Memorial* he advised Britain to accept the colonies as lost, recognize the United States as independent and sovereign, and make peace immediately. Then, through a policy of free trade, Britain should embrace the opportunity to reap the benefits of the former colonies' economic potential without the cost of governing them. To achieve this, the new nation needed to be integrated into the world economy and to do so he called upon the "Sovereigns of Europe" to convene a general European congress to deal with that issue.

What had changed for Pownall in the fifteen years between 1765 and 1780 was the 1776 publication of Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*. At first Pownall rejected Smith's views of free trade and the economic relationship between colonies and their

mother country.¹⁸ But by 1780, Pownall was realistic enough to see that Anglo-American reconciliation was impossible and, taking Smith's theories as his point of departure, had come to believe that any settlement of the Anglo-American conflict that maintained in some fashion the colonial dependence of the thirteen colonies was undesirable. Thus Britain's only viable option was to recognize the colonies as irretrievably lost, sign a peace treaty with the United States immediately, and reap the economic rewards of the new Anglo-American relationship.

Such a solution differed dramatically from other schemes floated over the five years since the war had begun. Even those in England who ostensibly favored the American cause and opposed a military solution, assumed that at some point the Americans would recognize that reality and self-interest required them reconcile with the mother country because only disaster could result from continuing the war. John Adams regarded such proposals as delusional. Adams wrote of David Hartley, one of those superficial devotees to the American cause, that he had never "yet reflected maturely enough upon the State of America, of Great Britain, and of all Europe, to get into a Right Way of thinking."¹⁹ Thomas Pownall, however, had arrived at "a Right Way of thinking" and it is precisely that which initially drew Adams to the *Memorial*.

The aspect of the *Memorial* that most appealed to John Adams was Pownall's vision of American economic promise coupled with Adam Smith's commentary on international trade in the *Wealth of Nations*. This is interesting with respect to Adams because while Smith's influence on Pownall is evident from even a cursory reading of the *Memorial*, there is no evidence in any of Adams' writings that he had read the *Wealth of Nations* prior to receiving the *Memorial*. But as an American Adams did not have to read

the *Wealth of Nations* to appreciate its relevance to the United States. This is because for Adams and many other Americans the validity of Smith's ideas regarding trade and colonies were self evident, constituting mainstream thought. Europeans, even the British, saw Smith's proposals regarding free trade as radical, a dangerous challenge to the existing economic order. But Americans, including John Adams, saw free trade as the means to insure the future prosperity, and thus the survival, of the new nation. And it was the sharp contrast that Pownall drew between the outmoded economic system of the Old World and the dynamic, unfettered economic system of the New World that held such appeal to Adams.

John Adams saw the creation of a new economic power in the world as the chief consequence of the American Revolution. Pownall's *Memorial* and Smith's *Wealth of Nations* confirmed to him that this was so. He believed in 1780, as he would write in 1783 almost as if he had a copy of the *Wealth of Nations* by his side, that "every Cask of Rice or Indigo, of Tobacco or Flax-seed, of Wheat or Flour & every Cargo of naval Stores, which goes to Europe fm. America will have written on it, 'Detur digniori,' i:e: This Cask or Cargo is consigned to him who will give the best price & pay me in such things as will suit me best. And every American Merchant who comes to Europe will go to that nation, of whatever language or religion, wh: can furnish him with the Goods he likes best—at the cheapest rate—on the largest Credit, and will receive the pay in such things as he has or can acquire. Every lad of 19. in America knows this."²⁰

John Adams was thinking along the same lines in 1776 when he drafted the Treaty Plan intended to entice the French to aid the United States in its struggle against England.²¹ Adams was well aware that France, England's—and, indeed America's—

traditional enemy, was the most likely candidate to provide assistance. By doing so France would have the opportunity to obtain revenge for, if not actually reverse, its losses in the Seven Years War. Moreover, Britain's loss of its American colonies—and this was conventional wisdom in both London and Paris—would irreversibly weaken it vis-à-vis France and thereby forever alter the European balance of power. But the Treaty Plan was for a Franco-American commercial treaty because Adams believed that access to the American market was sufficient incentive for France to provide the needed aid. At the same time, however, such an agreement would be a treaty between equals, with no implication that one party was subordinate to the other. This was because Adams believed the American Revolution and the war with England were as much about economics as politics. The American Revolution constituted a unilateral abrogation of the British Navigation Acts. Adams' vision of the future was of a United States that remained outside the maelstrom of European politics, was neutral in Europe's wars, and offered to all the nations of the world the opportunity to trade freely with the United States. And it was upon this isolation from European politics, but not from the European economic community, that the long-term survival of the United States depended.

These principles were to form the foundation of American foreign policy. This was as true in 1776 as it was twenty years later in George Washington's Farewell Address or almost fifty years thereafter in the Monroe Doctrine. And it was because they guided him when he drafted the first instrument to implement that policy that Adams felt that as its creator he had a proprietary interest in its execution. But in 1778 his vision and the policy that he saw as vital to the survival of the nation received a check. France was willing to aid the United States against Britain but it wanted more than simply a

commercial treaty. To irrevocably commit itself to the American cause it demanded and obtained a Treaty of Alliance that more closely tied the United States to France and, most importantly contained a guarantee that there would be no separate Anglo-American peace. In addition, much to Adams disgust expressed in countless letters, the United States was clearly the junior party to the alliance.

Certainly there were practical reasons for the French position. There was always the fear, one that Benjamin Franklin exploited during the negotiation of the Franco-American treaties, that an Anglo-American reconciliation would take place. To some degree this was because the French often found it difficult to distinguish between two peoples, both of whom spoke English. The French also realized that there were many in England who envisioned the American colonies rejoining Britain in the war against their traditional enemy. But it was also owing to the tightly controlled, increasingly ossified, and essentially mercantilist French economy and the relatively minor role, compared to Britain or America, that economics played in foreign policy. From Adams' point of view his cherished vision embodied in the Treaty Plan was sacrificed to the outmoded and restrictive policies of the Old World. Adams felt betrayed when he learned of the Alliance and never forgave Benjamin Franklin, who had served with him on the committee to draft the Treaty Plan, for concluding the alliance. His sense of betrayal also explains why John Adams never had any particular investment in the alliance and was ready, in both 1780 and 1782, to conclude a separate peace despite any agreements to the contrary.

John Adams' belief that his Treaty Plan had fallen victim to the old French system and way of thinking about the world meant that Thomas Pownall's differentiation

between the Old and the New World in the *Memorial* had a special resonance for him. This was particularly so because of the similarity in tone and outlook between the *Memorial* and Adams' own 1765 "Dissertation on the Canon and the Feudal Law."²² For John Adams there really was an Old and a New World, and the differences between the two were profound. Nor was he alone in seeing such a stark contrast. The writings of many Americans, including Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin, are filled with references to the contrast between American virtue and European decadence; to the need to protect young Americans against European influences. The "Dissertation" was John Adams' first major contribution to the literature of the American Revolution and there he argued that the Stamp Act was an effort to turn the clock backwards, to impose on Americans the same system that they and their ancestors had fled Europe to avoid. In effect, to impose the evils of the Old World on the New, to resurrect the limitations on the advancement of the common man that Americans had thus far avoided. According to Adams, the early settlers "were convinced by their knowledge of human nature derived from history and their own experience, that nothing could preserve their posterity from the encroachments of the two systems of tyranny [the canon and the feudal law] . . . but knowledge diffused generally thro' the whole body of the people." The result was that "a native of America who cannot read and write is as rare an appearance, as a Jacobite or a Roman Catholic, i.e. as rare as a Comet or an Earthquake. It has been observed, that we are all of us, lawyers, divines, politicians and philosophers. And I have good authorities to say that all candid foreigners who have passed thro' this country, and conversed freely with all sorts of people here, will allow, that they have never seen so much knowledge and civility among the common people in any part of the world."²³

In Thomas Pownall, Adams found a kindred soul. Unlike most of his countrymen, regardless of their position on the American rebellion, Pownall did not see Americans as simply Britons living in America. Like Adams, Pownall pointed to the freedom of Americans from the old European systems of restraint and oppression and warned that the result was an economic juggernaut that would overcome Europe unless Europeans were willing and able to make the adjustments necessary to survive and integrate the new nation into the world economy. According to Pownall, through European restrictions and restraints, avarice and ambition, “civilization was thus obstructed, the Spirit of Improvement checked, and the Light of Genius extinguished. Events *may* arise [the American Revolution], which may induce, the Rulers of Europe, to revise and reform the hard Conditions of its Imprisonment, and give it Liberty.” It was necessary because “in America, all the Inhabitants are free, and allow universal naturalization to all that wish to be so, and a perfect Liberty of using any mode of life they choose, or any means of getting a Livelihood, that their Talents lead them to. Their Souls are their own.” This was true because “in Europe the poor mans Wisdom is despized. The poor mans Wisdom is not Learning but Knowledge of his own Picking up, from facts and nature, by Simple Experience. In America, the Wisdom and not the Man is attended to. America is the Poor mans Country.”²⁴

John Adams was so struck by the similarity of Thomas Pownall’s view of the contrast between the Old and the New World in 1780, and his own in 1765 that on the very day he sent off to Congress his initial revision of the *Memorial* he wrote to Edmund Jenings. He explained that “there is a little Pamphlet, which was written by me in the Year 1765, and published at Boston, afterwards reprinted in England, under the Title of

‘a Dissertation on the Canon and the feudal Law.’” “I want to beg the favour of you to write to England to obtain it for me, and to get it printed in the Remembrancer.” The “Dissertation,” he wrote, “had an Effect on the People of New England beyond all Imagination. It appeared to point out the means by which human nature had been degraded in Europe, to shew them that their Ancestors had wisely and virtuously endeavored, to Screen them from those means.”²⁵

But what is most important about John Adams’ reading of Pownall’s *Memorial* is that it was an epiphany in so far as his mission was concerned. All was now clear, there would be no more hesitation, he now knew what was required of him. John Adams had found in the *Memorial* a viable plan to end the war, one propounded by a member of the British establishment whom he respected. Adams had never been under any illusions about the revival of Anglo-American trade in the postwar world. American taste, longstanding business relationships, and the availability of British credit made it inevitable. Following the lines set down in the *Memorial*, he could now argue that a British military victory, even if such were possible, was essentially meaningless. What was important was the two nations’ opportunity to resume their prewar economic relationship, based now on free trade rather than the restrictive Navigation Acts. He could now pose to Britain the possibility of losing the war but winning the peace or at least splitting the difference with the United States. It was this understanding that made Adams see his commission to negotiate a commercial treaty as of equal importance with that to negotiate a peace treaty, and it is what drove him in the summer of 1780 to execute his mission.

John Adams first had to convince the British public and government that there would be no settlement of the Anglo-American conflict short of full independence for the United States. On 6 April Henry Seymour Conway and Lord George Germain spoke in the House of Commons. In the process they displayed what Adams viewed as typical of all too many Britons, that is “an utter Incapacity of comprehending the Truth respecting America. They go on from Generation to Generation, believing every false and discrediting every true Account. Nothing is necessary, after a thousand Experiences that they have been deceived, but the trouble of forging a new Chimæra to obtain afresh their Confidence.”²⁶ It was an opportunity and Adams seized it.

The speeches of Conway and Germain centered on the unnaturalness of the Franco-American alliance and the desire of most Americans, because of the ties of language, religion, and trade, to abandon the alliance with France and return to their traditional relationship with Great Britain. A desire thwarted only by the tyranny of Congress. Adams replied over the signature of “Probus” in the London *General Advertiser and Morning Intelligencer*.²⁷ He sought to convince his British audience, along the lines set down in Pownall’s *Memorial*, since reconciliation was impossible British self-interest demanded peace. To believe otherwise, as clearly Conway and Germain did, was to be delusional. Traditional ties to Britain had long since been broken. America was a far more dynamic, diverse, and free society and Americans, despite what might be thought in London, were no longer British. If the war continued Britain risked driving the Americans closer to France and forfeiting their access to the postwar American market. By failing to end its efforts to reconquer the colonies Britain risked deepening its isolation from the world community as well as its economic future. In the

end, a failure to make peace and to recognize the United States as sovereign and independent was to risk the very existence of the British state.

John Adams might have continued his efforts in the pages of London newspapers along the same lines as his replies to Conway and Germain had not circumstances intervened. He began a correspondence with Vergennes resulting in a series of “Snarling, Growling Letters” from the foreign minister and almost simultaneously he received a pamphlet entitled *Cool Thoughts* by the Loyalist Joseph Galloway of whom Adams wrote: “a meaner, falser heart, never circulated blood.”²⁸ Adams’ responses to the two men in the summer of 1780 show that in his mind the French and Vergennes had become equated with the Loyalists and Galloway as posing the most formidable obstacles to an Anglo-American peace because they had the most to lose. The French would lose an ally; the Loyalists would lose their country.

For a variety of reasons, none of which bode well for a productive exchange, Vergennes opened a correspondence with Adams in June of 1780. Initially it centered on the contentious issue of Congress’ revaluation of its currency and its refusal to shield French merchants from its effects.²⁹ But after successfully defending the American position Adams turned to other matters, namely French resistance to the execution of his mission. He argued that French aid, particularly the deployment of French naval forces to American waters, had been inadequate and that if it continued at its current levels could not result in the defeat of British forces anytime soon. Adams criticized the French efforts on behalf of Spain in the European theater and in the West Indies when the most vulnerable point of British operations was their need to supply their forces in America by sea. French interdiction of those supply routes was the most effective way to achieve

victory. And victory, hopefully soon, was essential because Americans were becoming weary of the war that had lasted five years and seemed no closer to a resolution than when it began. If France did not exert itself more decisively it could not expect its allies to continue forever a war that seemed to have no end. If nothing else, Adams' comments confirmed the foreign minister's doubts about his loyalties and raised anew the specter of an Anglo-American reconciliation.

Adams turned to the issue of his mission to negotiate with England and, in particular, to conclude a commercial treaty. Referring to Vergennes' February letter cautioning against revealing Adams mission, particularly to negotiate a commercial treaty, Adams wrote that after "reflecting upon this subject as maturely as I can," he was unable "to collect any Reasons which appear to me sufficient for concealing the Nature of my Powers in their full extent, from the Court of London. On the contrary, many arguments have occurred to me, which seem to shew it to be the policy of the United States, and my particular Duty to communicate them." It was, he believed, "inconsistent with the design and nature of my appointments to conceal them from the Court of London."³⁰ Eight days later, Vergennes responded that the reasons for giving such "advice to Mr. Adams are so simple as to appear preemptory" for "to be concerned with a treaty of commerce before having made peace is to be concerned with decorating a building before laying its foundation."³¹ The following day Adams replied that he would communicate the foreign minister's sentiments to Congress and defer to Vergennes' judgment on the matter, but warned, "there is a great body of People in America, as determined as any to support their independence, and their Alliances, who notwithstanding wish that no measure may be left unattempted by Congress or their

Servants to manifest their readiness for Peace, upon such terms as they think honourable and advantageous to all parties.” And, he noted, his deference to Vergennes’ views “by no means extends so far as to agree in all Cases to those sentiments without examination. I cannot therefore agree in Sentiment, that proposing a Treaty of Peace and Commerce is discovering a great deal of weakness.”³² Three days later Adams was on the road to Amsterdam and would not return to Paris until the following July.

At the same time that John Adams was burning his diplomatic bridges in so far as Vergennes and France were concerned he was seeking to neutralize the Loyalist opposition to peace in England. Joseph Galloway was perhaps the most visible and virulent Loyalist then resident in London. Adams had met Galloway at the First Continental Congress where the Philadelphian authored a plan for Anglo-American reconciliation that Congress expunged from its records. Galloway argued in his *Cool Thoughts* that the incompetence of the British military and its leaders had prevented a successful resolution of the American rebellion. But he believed victory was still possible and remained vital to the survival of the British empire. It was to counter the positions of those such as Pownall that he presented his *Cool Thoughts* “on the consequences to Great Britain of American Independence”; “on the expence of Great Britain in the settlement and defence of the American colonies”; and “on the value and importance of the American Colonies and the West Indies to the British Empire.” *Cool Thoughts* cataloged the consequences, all of them dire, resulting from American independence. Not only would there be no benefit from American independence, but Britain’s economy would be shattered and it would be further isolated in Europe. France would be ascendant and a new bastion of French power established in the New World. Adams wrote that “this

writer is so cool that he thinks of nothing. A little warmth of imagination would be of use to him.”³³

John Adams’ reply to Galloway took the form of twelve letters that, when they were ultimately published, were attributed to “a Distinguished American.” Building on what he had read in Pownall’s *Memorial* Adams made it very clear that there could be no resolution of the Anglo-American conflict short of full independence for the former colonies. American independence was in Britain’s interest and every one of Galloway’s “Cool Thoughts” to the contrary was equally valid as reason to end the war and forge a new Anglo-American relationship that would ensure the economic future of both nations. Adams wrote that “if England would awake out of her dream and make peace . . . acknowledge the American treaties with France, and make a similar treaty of commerce with the United States . . . neither France nor any other nation of Europe would be able to rival England in those manufactures which we most wanted in America.”³⁴ According to Adams “even now America remains ready to renew her commerce with England to as great an advantage as ever, if they will make peace. Are domination and taxation necessary to trade?”³⁵

In emphasizing Britain’s need to come to terms with the United States if it was to enjoy the benefits of access to the American market, Adams was touching on the major point on which he had differed with Pownall. That is, Pownall proposed that there be an international conference to integrate the United States into the European economic system. Adams, however, in both his *Translation of Pownall’s Memorial* and in his reply to Galloway emphasized that it was Britain’s responsibility alone to recognize the importance of Anglo-American trade to its future prosperity because the European

nations, beginning with France had already taken measures to incorporate America into the economic system and if Britain delayed it would remain isolated and impoverished by its refusal to accept what had already become reality.

But Galloway's strongest argument—because it played on the British fear of their traditional enemy—was that an America allied with France would threaten the still substantial British holdings in North America and most importantly the West Indies. Could those holdings of great value survive American independence? John Adams had a ready retort that was all the more significant owing to his simultaneous exchanges with Vergennes. Speaking of the Franco American Treaty of Alliance, Adams declared that “this treaty lasts no longer than this war.”³⁶ This renunciation of the French alliance was written over two years before the preliminary Anglo-American peace treaty was signed by Adams, Benjamin Franklin, John Jay, and Henry Laurens. An act, done without consulting or informing the French, that amounted to much the same thing.

John Adams sent his reply to Galloway off to London with the intent that it be immediately published. Those were his instructions to his agent Edmund Jenings and the first half the “Letters” were enclosed in the same letter to Jenings that contained the final portion of the *Memorial*.³⁷ For reasons that remain unexplained, Jenings obtained the Memorial's publication in early 1781, but the “Letters from a Distinguished American” languished until of mid-1782 when the Earl of Shelburne was in the process of initiating peace negotiations. The delay was fortunate for John Adams' diplomatic career. After the preliminary peace was signed he became concerned that someone in America might read the “Letters” and realize that they had been written in 1780. This was owing to the fact that he had sent Congress three letters containing an earlier and shorter version of his

rebuttal of Galloway that said nothing of his intention to publish it and, most importantly, nothing of view of the Franco-American alliance's future. He feared that, given the criticism received by the American peace commissioners for violating their instructions by not informing France of their negotiations, there might be adverse comment regarding what he had proposed in 1780.

And there can be little doubt about what wanted in 1780. He sought to negotiate a separate peace treaty with England in violation of the Franco-American alliance. He took the arguments advanced by Thomas Pownall in his Memorial and from them formed the basis for what he believed was a viable strategy to end the war. The influence of Pownall is evident in his replies to Conway and Germain and his exchanges with Vergennes. Pownall's arguments that British self-interest demanded that it make peace with America are reiterated time and time again in the "Letters from a Distinguished American," although in a more polemical form. When he arrived at Paris in 1780, John Adams intended to do everything possible to advance his mission. But it is unlikely that he would have gone so far down the road toward a separate peace had he not read Thomas Pownall's *Memorial to the Sovereigns of Europe* and believed that therein lay the means to realize the foreign policy as he had envisioned it when he drafted the Treaty Plan of 1776.

¹ *Diary and Autobiography of John Adams*, ed L.H. Butterfield and others, Cambridge, 1961, 4 vols., 3:151. Referred to as JA, *D&A*.

² *Catalogue of John Adams Library in the Public Library of the City of Boston*, Boston, 1917.

³ JA, *D&A*, 4:181–183. It should be noted, and John Adams certainly did, that the 1781 instructions issued to the joint peace commission composed of Adams, Benjamin Franklin, John Jay, and Henry Laurens, directed the commissioners "to make the most candid & confidential communications to the ministers of our generous ally the King of France to undertake nothing in the Negotiations for Peace or truce without

their knowledge & concurrence & ultimately to govern yourselves by their advice & opinion,” *Papers of John Adams*, ed. Robert J. Taylor, Gregg L. Lint and others, Cambridge, 1977– , 11:376. Referred to as JA, *Papers*.

⁴ JA, *D&A*, 4:183–184.

⁵ From the Comte de Vergennes, 24 Feb. 1780, *ibid.*, 4:251–252.

⁶ From the Comte de Vergennes, 30 March 1780, JA, *Papers*, 9:97–98.

⁷ To the President of Congress, 30 March 1780, *ibid.*, 9:93–94.

⁸ To C.W.F. Dumas, 6 Feb. 1781, *ibid.*, 11:116.

⁹ To Robert R. Livingston, 21 Feb. 1782, *ibid.*, 12:254.

¹⁰ To Edmund Jenings, 2 April 1780, *ibid.*, 9:104–105.

¹¹ *General Advertiser and Morning Intelligencer*, 12 April.

¹² To Edmund Jenings, 19 April 1780, JA, *Papers*, 9:155–157.

¹³ *General Advertiser and Morning Intelligencer*, 1 May 1780.

¹⁴ Thomas Digges, an American living in London, wrote on 6 April that he was sending Benjamin Franklin some newspapers and pamphlets, and directed Adams’ attention to a pamphlet authored by Thomas Pownall. Franklin, according to Digges’ instructions, passed on the pamphlet to Adams. Adams received Digges’ letter on 15 April and by the 19th he had read the *Memorial*, revised and shortened it, and sent it off as a letter to Congress. That letter, with additional revisions, formed the basis for Adams’ *Translation*. JA, *Papers*, 9:109–111, 139–141, 164–196.

¹⁵ JA, *Papers*, 9:196. This was not solely Adams’ view. In a review of Adams’ *Translation* that appeared in the February 1781 issue of *The Monthly Review, or Literary Journal*, the reviewer remarked that “the Language of this Piece [Pownall’s *Memorial*], was variously spoken of, at the Time of its first Publication: it is stiff and affected. It is quaint. It is disguised by a Studied Obscurity.”

¹⁶ “Novanglus,” No. 2, JA, *Papers*, 2:235.

¹⁷ Same, 10:10.

¹⁸ *A Letter from Governor Pownall to Adam Smith, LLD, F.R.S. . . .*, London, 1776.

¹⁹ To the president of Congress, 18 April 1780, JA, *Papers*, 9:148–153.

²⁰ To Edmund Jenings, 21 April 1783, *ibid.*, 14:433–435.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 4:260–302.

²² “Dissertation on the Canon and the Feudal Law,” May–October 1765, JA, *Papers*, 1:103–128. Previous to 1780, the “Dissertation” had appeared in the *Boston Gazette* of 12 and 19 Aug., 30 Sept., and 21 Oct. 1765; the *London Chronicle* of 23 and 28 Nov., 3 and 26 Dec. 1765; and finally in *The True Sentiments of America*, London, 1768.

²³ JA, *Papers*, 1:118, 120.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 9:201, 202.

²⁵ To Edmund Jenings, 19 April 1780, *ibid.*, 9:221–222. Despite Adams’ request, the “Dissertation” did not appear in John Almon’s *Remembrancer* and was not republished until 1782.

²⁶ To Joseph Reed, 11 Feb. 1784, LbC, Adams Papers. Although expressed in 1784, this observation was equally applicable to the situation as Adams saw it in 1780.

²⁷ The replies were initially published in the 3 and 17 June issues of the *Mercur d France*. Through the efforts of Edmund Jenings, who presumably added the pseudonym “Probus”, they appeared shortly thereafter in the *General Advertiser and Morning Intelligencer*, but the issues in which they appeared have not been found. JA, *Papers*, 9:504–506

²⁸ The description of Vergennes’ letters is taken from the Letterbook into which John Adams copied them, for which see JA, *Papers*, 9:xii–xiii, 454. The characterization of Galloway appears in Adams’ first letter to Edmund Jenings of 18 July 1780, same, 10:8–11.

²⁹ Same, 9:427–430.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 10:1–4.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 10:32–42.

³² *Ibid.*, 10:42–48.

³³ *Ibid.*, 9:561.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 9:353–354.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 9:567.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 9:557.

³⁷ John Adams sent the Memorial to Edmund Jenings as enclosures to his letters of 8 (Adams Papers) and 14 July (JA, *Papers*, 9:588–590) and the “Letters” were enclosed with his letters of 14 and 22 July (Adams Papers).