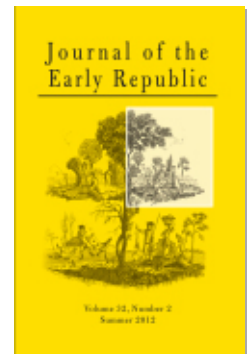# Private Letters and Public Diplomacy: The Adams Network and the Quasi-War, 1797-1798

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Private Letters and Public Diplomacy
The Adams Network and the Quasi-War, 1797–1798

NATHAN PERL-ROSENTHAL

In January, 1797, war between France and the United States seemed imminent. Angered by perceived diplomatic slights, the government in Paris had issued a number of sharply worded statements complaining of American perfidy; meanwhile, U.S. newspapers were reporting more and more French attacks on American shipping in the West Indies. A concerned John Adams, about to assume the presidency, set out to determine the French government's true intentions. Yet even though he was vice president and the de facto president-elect, Adams did not seek the counsel of Secretary of State Timothy Pickering, the nation's chief diplomat, or of any other member of the official cabinet. Instead, Adams wrote a series of letters to personal friends and family members. He asked them to supply him with information about the likelihood of war, give their opinion about the motives of the French government, and speculate on the hidden springs of its actions. Only months later, in April, after he had collected the news from his friends and relatives and gotten their opinion of events, did he finally seek the advice of the cabinet.

Adams's behavior in early 1797 raises an important question: Why did he and other early national politicians so often turn to private correspondence for political information and advice? What exactly did private networks offer that the official channels did not? Though historians have long relied on private letters as a source for the political history of the

early republic, no study has looked systematically at these questions. This is all the more surprising given the focus on private life and personal self-fashioning in much of the recent scholarship on early national politics. John Adams's conduct of the Quasi-War with France in 1797 and 1798 offers a useful case study for deciphering the distinctive contribution that private epistolary networks made to public politics in the early republic. Drawing primarily on the unpublished Adams Family Papers, this essay shows that Adams relied on two distinct and quite different networks to acquire and process the information he needed to resolve the diplomatic crisis with France: an official network, centered on his cabinet and built around formal political structures, and a private one of friends and family that rested on relationships of personal trust. The private network, moreover, had distinctive assumptions about how to collect and evaluate information and developed its own principles for interpreting it. These shared beliefs, together with the trust that bound its members together, led Adams to regard the information and advice that the private network provided him as considerably more accurate and reliable than what came via official channels.[1]

My analysis of the Adams correspondence draws on methods for studying early modern knowledge networks developed by historians of science and the European republic of letters. Like politicians, early modern scientists had a hunger for reliable information and relied on private epistolary networks to get it. Historians of science have shown that these

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1. Edith B. Gelles, *Abigail Adams: A Writing Life* (New York, 1998), esp. 130–65, examines the mechanics of private political correspondence in early America though it does not explicity compare public and private networks. On the importance of intimate relationships in the politics of the early republic, see Catherine Allgor, *Parlor Politics: In Which the Ladies of Washington City Help Build A City and a Government* (Charlottesville, VA, 2000); Susan Branson, *These Fiery Frenchified Dames: Women and Political Culture in Early National Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 2001); and Andrew Burstein and Nancy Isenberg, *Madison and Jefferson* (New York, 2010). For political self-fashioning in the early republic, see Joanne B. Freeman, *Affairs of Honor: National Politics in the New Republic* (New Haven, CT, 2001), esp. xvi–xix and 38–48. For women in the politics of the early republic, see the studies cited above and Edith B. Gelles, *Portia: The World of Abigail Adams* (Bloomington, IN, 1992); Jan Lewis, "The Republican Wife: Virtue and Seduction in the Early Republic," *William and Mary Quarterly* 44 (Oct. 1987), 689–721; and Rosemarie Zagarri, *Revolutionary Backlash: Women and Politics in the Early American Republic* (Philadelphia, 2007).

scholars developed tightly knit communities, which had high barriers to entry and were knit together by what sociologists call "strong ties," such as long-term friendship or even family alliance. Newcomers might need anything from a letter of introduction to a precise socioprofessional status to gain entry. Within these closed circles, underpinned by trust, scholars developed shared standards for collecting, managing, and evaluating the reliability of information, which enabled them to have confidence in information transmitted over great distances. Shared standards, moreover, made it possible for individual savants to gather information via their own "weak ties" (e.g., with acquaintances, associates, social inferiors) and add it, appropriately filtered and evaluated, to the circle's common fund of knowledge.[2]

From the point of view of political history, perhaps the most important insight of this scholarship is that knowledge networks were deeply collaborative. Though they usually had nodes—that is, individuals or groups who had more connections than others or presided over parts of the network—each network's distinctive standards and norms were a product of collective judgment and consideration. The nodal members did not impose their ideas on everyone else. Peripheral individuals, together, played an important part in shaping the network's collective assumptions. Thus, we can and indeed must look at statements by all the

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2. David Lux and Harold C. Cook, "Closed Circles or Open Networks? Communicating at a Distance during the Scientific Revolution," *History of Science* 36 (June 1998), 180–211, is an elegant discussion of the at-once closed and open nature of scientific networks. See also Harold C. Cook, *Matters of Exchange: Commerce, Medicine, and Science in the Dutch Golden Age* (New Haven, CT, 2007), esp. 200–207. On shared standards of judgment, see especially Steven Shapin, *A Social History of Truth: Civility and Science in Seventeenth-Century England* (Chicago, 1994), 193–242, esp. 202–211; Pierre-Yves Beaurepaire, Jens Häseler, and Anthony McKenna, eds., *Réseaux de correspondance à l'âge classique (XVIe–XVIIIe siècle)* (Saint-Etienne, France, 2006), 147–59, esp. 158–59; and Anne Goldgar, *Impolite Learning: Conduct and Community in the Republic of Letters, 1680–1750* (New Haven, CT, 1995), 3–6 and 167–73. Many of these scholars draw on sociological studies of networks. Overviews of this scholarship can be found in Stanley Wasserman and Katherine Faust, *Social Network Analysis: Methods and Applications* (Cambridge, UK, 1994); Vincent Buskens, "The Social Structure of Trust," *Social Networks* 20 (July 1998) 265–89; and Charles Kadushin, *Making Connections: Introduction to Social Network Theory* (Oxford, UK, forthcoming). I am grateful to Professor Kadushin for sharing portions of his book manuscript with me.

members of the network, not just the main players, in order to understand what assumptions and principles were animating its participants. Similarly, the production of information depended as much on weak ties operating at the periphery as it did on the strong ties that bound together the main participants in the network. The process of information collection and transmission thus also foregrounds the contributions of little-studied peripheral individuals.[3]

   This article describes the official and private networks on which Adams relied, discusses the social ties that created them, and analyzes the confidence that Adams had in each one. Case studies of two key moments in 1797 and 1798 show how the private network played an important role in shaping Adams's response to diplomatic crisis. Adams's decision to send a peace mission to France in 1797 and his selection of emissaries illustrate aspects of the private network's mechanics and its role in public politics. The discussions leading to a new mission to France show how the private network developed distinctive principles, which helped guide Adams's decision-making. This case, along with an earlier episode, also illustrates how the mechanisms of information collection and transmission provided Adams with earlier and more accurate news than was available to other political actors. The process of choosing the emissaries, on the other hand, highlights the crucial role that strong

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   3. For a discussion of the collaborative ideal, see works cited above and L. W. B. Brockliss, *Calvet's Web: Enlightenment and the Republic of Letters in Eighteenth-Century France* (Oxford, UK, 2002), 104–12. For examples of collaboration in practice, see the above; Rob Iliffe, "Material Doubts: Hooke, Artisan Culture and the Exchange of Information in 1670s London," *British Journal for the History of Science* 28 (Sept. 1995), 285–318; and Shapin, *Social History*, esp. 253–66. For an interesting counterperspective, which questions the collaborative ideal of the republic of letters, see Noel Malcolm, "Private and Public Knowledge: Kircher, Esotericism, and the Republic of Letters," in *Athanasius Kircher: The Last Man Who Knew Everything*, ed. Paula Findlen (New York, 2004), 297–308. For a sociological perspective on the collective shaping of opinion in networks, see Ronald S. Burt, "Bandwidth and Echo: Trust, Information, and Gossip in Social Networks," in *Networks and Markets*, ed. J. E. Rauch and Alessandra Casella (New York, 2001), 30–74. In its emphasis on collaboration, this essay differs from Richard D. Brown's approach, which emphasizes the role of information as an instrument of social power; see Brown, *Knowledge Is Power: The Diffusion of Information in Early America, 1700–1865* (New York, 1989), 3, 26–34 and 129–31.

ties of personal trust, created and sustained through the private network, played in Adams's diplomatic practice. Both cases reveal that the private network did not work alone: It interacted with and complemented the official network centered on the cabinet.

Recovering the role of Adams's private network has implications for the reputation of the Adams presidency, the history of politics in eighteenth-century America more broadly, and the history of knowledge networks in the early modern Atlantic world. In the narrowest sense, it presents a revised account of John Adams's diplomatic decision-making. Seen through the lens of his private network, Adams's decisions in 1797 appear more consistent and less subservient to the wishes of the cabinet than has usually been thought. This study also offers a possible model for thinking about high politics in eighteenth-century America. Most early U.S. politicians had similar private epistolary networks and, like Adams, depended on them (in conjunction with official networks) to make decisions. The political history of the early republic, even at the highest levels, depended on those less-studied family members, friends, and clients. A network approach to politics emphasizes their role as both contributors of information and co-creators of the intellectual frameworks that statesmen used to interpret it. Finally, by extending some of the key insights of recent scholarship on the history of science and the republic of letters in early modern Europe to the political history of the United States, it intervenes in those literatures as well. It opens up new questions, in particular, about the distinctiveness of scholarly/scientific as opposed to political networks in the early modern period.

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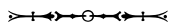
The Adams diplomatic correspondence network was a complex structure that integrated official and unofficial communications from correspondents with varying degrees of trustworthiness. In theory, the heart of the system was the official diplomatic network run by the Secretary of State, Timothy Pickering. Pickering himself had some strong ties with Adams. He was originally from Salem, Massachusetts, and like Adams a graduate of Harvard College. By the early 1770s, he had become an important figure in local patriot politics, and he and his brother, John, were well known to Adams. He served in the Continental Army throughout the entire war, rising by 1780 to be Quartermaster General. Yet even though he was well known to Adams and his friends, he was never a

favorite. In 1781, Adams and his close friend, Francis Dana, exchanged some words about Pickering. Dana suggest that he had "much Integrity, Industry and good Sense," but in his reply Adams expressed considerable skepticism.[4]

Adams's mixed feelings about Pickering remained unchanged, or perhaps affirmed, at the beginning of his presidency. Though he did not criticize Pickering outright, Adams made clear that the secretary did not have his confidence. In a letter to his son John Quincy, a diplomat in Europe, he told him to continue his "practice of writing freely to me and cautiously to the office of state." Adams also made clear that he had serious doubts about the trustworthiness of the official diplomatic corps, which Pickering ran, and the quality of the information it provided. Adams felt that most U.S. diplomatic agents were lacking in the "industry, vigilance and zeal" necessary for truly successful diplomacy. Some, he noted, lacked even the basic necessities of "judgment and discernment." The information they provided would be equally suspect.[5]

Adams had only weak ties with the other three members of his cabinet, and he had even less reason to have confidence in them than he did in Pickering. These three men, Secretary of the Treasury Oliver Wolcott, Secretary of War James McHenry, and Attorney General Charles Lee, were Adams's main group of official advisors, charged by the Constitu-

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4. Francis Dana to John Adams (hereafter JA), Feb. 12, 1781, *Papers of John Adams*, ed. Robert J. Taylor et al. (13 vols., Cambridge, MA, 1977–), 11: 144. On Pickering, see Gerard H. Clarfield, *Timothy Pickering and the American Republic* (Pittsburgh, PA, 1980) and Clarfield, "Timothy Pickering" in *American National Biography*, ed. John A. Garraty and Mark C. Carnes (24 vols., New York, 1999). On Adams's friendship with Dana, see James Grant, *John Adams: Party of One* (New York, 2005), 232, and also below, note 30.

5. JA to John Quincy Adams (hereafter JQA), June 2, 1797, in *The Works of John Adams, Second President of the United States*, ed. Charles Francis Adams (1850–1856; repr. Freeport, NY, 1969), 8: 545. JA to Elbridge Gerry, Feb. 20, 1797, Adams Family Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston ("industry, vigilance"). See also Gerry's response: Elbridge Gerry to JA, Mar. 7, 1797, Adams Family Papers. For more on the failings of the diplomatic network, see JQA to JA, Jan. 14, 1797, *Writings of John Quincy Adams*, ed. Worthington Chauncey Ford (7 vols., New York, 1913–1917), 2: 88–89. On Adams and Pickering, see Stephen G. Kurtz, *The Presidency of John Adams: The Collapse of Federalism, 1795–1800* (Philadelphia, 1957), 270–75; and Clarfield, *Pickering and the American Republic*, 180–81.

tion with giving him their "Opinion, in writing" on any matter in which he requested their advice. Yet the three men did not have deep connections with Adams; they had gotten to know him well only during the previous few years. Of the three, only McHenry had been old enough to enjoy a position of responsibility during the Revolution before Adams left the United States in 1778 for his long sojourn in Europe. Adams's wry remark to Elbridge Gerry, in February, 1797, that the cabinet secretaries were "as much attached to me as I desire" reflects his tepid enthusiasm for them. His discovery a few weeks later that all three of them had worked with Alexander Hamilton to try to throw the presidential election to Thomas Pinckney cannot have helped build the trust between him and them.[6]

Alongside these official structures for information collection and evaluation, Adams had an informal network of informants and advisers spread across Europe and America. Knit together by bonds of trust, it operated as a sort of shadow state department. Abigail Adams was a key link in the web of relationships that formed this informal network. Her role as a political advisor to her husband on domestic issues is well known. She was also instrumental at times in managing the flow of diplomatic information and connecting John to his supporters in Massachusetts. In the summer of 1797, for instance, all the substantive letters that John Quincy received from his parents were written by his mother, not his father. June and July, 1797, saw her corresponding with some of her husband's colleagues and diffusing sensitive information that they had received from their sons in Europe.[7]

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6. JA to Gerry, Feb. 13, 1797, *Adams Works*, ed. Adams, 8: 523. For Adams's lack of confidence in the cabinet, see John E. Ferling, *John Adams: A Life* (New York, 1996), 333–34. On Hamilton's efforts to throw the election to Pinckney and Adams's knowledge of it, see Ferling, *John Adams*, 330–31; Stanley N. Elkins and Eric McKitrick, *The Age of Federalism: The Early American Republic, 1788–1800* (New York, 1993), 523–28; and Adams, ed., *Adams Works*, 8: 524n1.

7. On Abigail's role as an advisor as well as her assumption of some of John's political duties, see Phyllis Lee Levin, *Abigail Adams: A Biography* (New York, 1987), 334–37; Page Smith, *John Adams* (2 vols., Garden City, NY, 1962), 937–39; and Woody Holton, *Abigail Adams: A Life* (New York, 2009). For her assumption of correspondence with John Quincy and others, see Abigail Adams (hereafter AA) to JQA of June 15, June 23, and July 14, 1797, Adams Family Papers; and AA to Francis Dana, June 29, 1797; Adams Family Papers; AA to Elizabeth Dana, June 5, 1797, Adams Family Papers; and AA to Elbridge Gerry,

The Adams sons, John Quincy and Thomas, served as the informal network's main conduit for European news. A diplomat in Europe since 1794, John Quincy was by 1797 the U.S. representative to Prussia. His brother Thomas served as his personal secretary, sharing in his private and official correspondence. In addition to the observations they made themselves, the sons employed their own network of informants in other European capitals. This reliance on friends and clients for unofficial diplomatic news was commonplace among European diplomats. John Quincy relied particularly heavily in this period on two friends: William Vans Murray, who became Minister at The Hague in March, 1797 and Joseph Pitcairn, the U.S. vice-consul in Paris. John Quincy had first gotten to know Murray in 1784 while in Europe as his father's secretary; they traveled together and became fast friends. How he met Joseph Pitcairn, a British subject naturalized as an American, is less clear. Most likely, Pitcairn had become friends with John Quincy during his stay in England in 1796. By late 1796, they were regularly exchanging several letters per month. "Your information is always interesting," John Quincy assured him in February, "and may become at present particularly important."[8]

Murray and Pitcairn, in turn, drew information from a wide range of local and regional informants, most of whose identities are unknown to us. Pitcairn's letters, in particular, are filled with oblique references to his sources. He rarely identified them by name, but always told his friend how reliable he thought them to be. A report he heard in February, that France would not provoke the United States any further, came "from

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July 7, 1797, Adams Family Papers; and, for diffusing sensitive information, AA to Thomas B. Adams (hereafter TBA), June 20, 1797, Adams Family Papers.

8. JQA to Joseph Pitcairn, Feb. 10, 1797, *Adams Writings*, ed. Ford, 2: 118. On how JQA became acquainted with Murray, see JQA to JA, June 15, 1785, *Adams Family Correspondence*, ed. L.H. Butterfield, Marc Friedlaender, and Richard Alan Ryerson (9 vols., Boston, 1963–), 5: 344. For JQA's biography, see Paul C. Nagel, *John Quincy Adams: A Public Life, A Private Life* (New York, 1997). The first mention of JQA's acquaintance with Pitcairn is in April, 1796: "Call at Pitcairn's," Apr. 5, 1796, JQA diary 23, Adams Family Papers. The best study of European intelligence-gathering in this period, although focused on British India, is C. A. Bayly, *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780–1870* (Cambridge, UK, 1996), esp. 58–69. See also Lucien Bély and Isabelle Richefort, *Invention de la diplomatie: Moyen Age-temps modernes* (Paris, 1998).

considerable authority." An April report that "American vessels were to be taken even coming to France" was contradicted by the word of "the bankers and people in general [who] say the worst is over." "A few days," he added hopefully, "will perhaps clear up these mysteries." On receiving news the same month that the French Treasury had blocked payments to U.S. subjects, he went in person to find out "the truth" and "from M de Clerck fils the chief of the comptability received the assurance of its reality." These details served to assure John Quincy of the accuracy and truthfulness of the information Pitcairn was passing him.[9]

John and Abigail Adams considered the duly filtered and weighted information that their sons sent from Europe to be particularly reliable and actionable. Shortly after his inauguration, John wrote that the brothers' correspondence "contained more satisfactory information that all the other letters from Europe" (including, presumably, the official diplomatic letters). Abigail Adams added a few months later that the information in the brothers' letters was "so accurate that great dependance is placed upon them." It was, moreover, not just accurate but also earlier and often more sensitive than what came through official channels. In early 1797, for example, American diplomats in France learned that some of the privateers attacking American ships were crewed by Americans. Joseph Pitcairn informed John Quincy Adams of this in March of 1797 and warned him that he thought it had "done us . . . harm [in the French] councils, in giving a very disgraceful air to our national character." John Quincy passed this sensitive information on to his father in the same month, but only mentioned it to Secretary of State Pickering in a letter written five months later.[10]

In addition to the private European information network, an informal network of political advisors in the United States helped the Adamses decide what to do with the information they received. This, too, was commonplace among contemporary European political leaders. For John

9. Pitcairn to JQA, Feb. 18, 1797, Adams Family Papers; Pitcairn to JQA, Apr. 23, 1797, Adams Family Papers; Pitcairn to JQA, Apr. 9, 1797, Adams Family Papers.

10. JA to TBA, Mar. 31, 1797, Adams Family Papers; AA to TBA, June 20, 1797, Adams Family Papers; Pitcairn to JQA, Mar. 3, 1797, Adams Family Papers. For JQA's delay in passing sensitive information to Pickering, see JQA to JA, Mar. 18, 1797, *Adams Writings*, ed. Ford, 2: 142 and JQA to Pickering, Oct. 31, 1797, *Adams Writings*, ed. Ford, 2: 219.

Adams, the most important of these informal advisors was certainly Elbridge Gerry, his "dear friend" of many years' standing. Like Pickering and Adams himself, Gerry was from Massachusetts and a graduate of Harvard. He had been a leader of the patriot movement there, became acquainted with Adams as early as 1772, and served with him in the Second Continental Congress. The trust between them ran very deep. "That man must have more skill in intrigue than any that I have been acquainted with," Adams wrote melodramatically in 1797, "who can sap the foundation of the confidence I have in Mr. Gerry."[11]

Aside from Gerry, Adams relied most on private individuals with whom he was linked by family ties, long friendship, or both. Two of them, Josiah Quincy, Jr., and Thomas Welsh, were connected in both ways. Quincy was the scion of a prominent family from near Adams's hometown of Braintree. The families shared a long history together, both in and out of politics. Before he married Abigail, John Adams had courted Quincy's aunt. His father had been Adams's co-counsel during the trial of the soldiers accused of perpetrating the Boston Massacre and had been a leading member of the Boston Committee of Correspondence. Quincy's grandfather, yet another Josiah Quincy, served in the Continental Army and was a longtime correspondent of Adams's. All of this provided ample reason to have confidence in the young man. Thomas Welsh, also a Massachusetts man and Harvard graduate, was a medical doctor who in 1777 married Abigail Adams's first cousin. He and the Adamses quickly became close, and he maintained a correspondence with them—especially with Abigail—over the next two decades. By 1797, he was one of the most important figures in the Boston medical commu-

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11. JA to Gerry, July 17, 1797, *Adams Works*, ed. Adams, 8: 549. For date of their acquaintance, see *Diary and Autobiography of John Adams*, ed. L. H. Butterfield et al. (4 vols., Cambridge, MA, 1961), 2: 74–75. European princes frequently relied on unofficial advisors, often "favorites" and royal spouses and mistresses. In the French context, see Sarah Maza, *Private Lives and Public Affairs: The Causes Célèbres of Prerevolutionary France* (Berkeley, CA, 1993), 172–74, 178–83. In the English context, George III's reliance on his tutor, Lord Bute, early in his reign was a form of this behavior; see Jeremy Black, *George III: America's Last King* (New Haven, CT, 2006), 14–21 and 51–54; and John Brewer, *Party Ideology and Popular Politics at the Accession of George III* (Cambridge, UK, 1976), 119–21.

nity. A third frequent correspondent in the first half of 1797 was the Adamses' son-in-law, William Smith. A New Yorker and former officer in the Continental Army, he had met the Adamses in London in 1785 and married their eldest daughter, Nabby, the following year. Smith turned out to be a poor husband in every sense of the word. But he corresponded regularly with his father-in-law and although Adams expressed doubts about him from time to time there was no breach between them until 1798.[12]

This web of personal relationships was crucial because the Adamses and their correspondents regarded information as trustworthy only when it came from a trustworthy person. They were skeptical of news and opinions that came from uncertain or anonymous sources. They gave little credence to rumors, for instance, unless substantiated by "information of a more positive authority." Newspapers, which anonymously published bits of information, extracts of letters and items from other newspapers, were a slightly more difficult case. The Adams network regarded reading the newspapers as absolutely "necessary to form an accurate opinion of current events." Yet they also maintained a healthy suspicion of them. Elbridge Gerry thought the newspapers were generally "superficial" in their treatment of political events. John Quincy, among others, did not consider that the information they conveyed

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12. On Quincy, see Josiah Quincy, *Memoir of the Life of Josiah Quincy, Jun. of Massachusetts* (Boston, 1825), 33; William Vail Kellen, ed., "Journal of Josiah Quincy, Jr., during His Voyage and Residence in England," *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society* (1917), 443–71; Ferling, *John Adams*, 26–27. On Welsh, see "Thomas Welsh" in *Sibley's Harvard Graduates*, ed. John Langdon Sibley and Clifford Keyon Shipton (18 vols., Boston, 1873–1999), 18: 183–88. Welsh's correspondence with AA, 1785–1787, can be found in *Adams Family Correspondence*, vols. 6–8. By the late 1790s, Smith's reputation in the family was already somewhat sullied; see, e.g., AA to Mary Cranch, May 16, 1797, *New Letters of Abigail Adams, 1788–1801*, ed. Stewart Mitchell (Boston, 1947), 89–91. But it was only in 1798, after he embarrassed Adams by demanding an army post and then was revealed to have made more bad investments, that Adams bitterly disavowed him. For the family's early impressions of Smith, see David McCullough, *John Adams* (New York, 2001), 338. For the family's doubts about him, see McCullough, *Adams*, 454; and Page Smith, *John Adams* (2 vols., Garden City, NY, 1962), 837; for the breach, see McCullough, *Adams*, 520; and Smith, *Adams*, 991–92.

constituted a truly "authentic account" of political events. The Adams circle instead looked for other sources of information, particularly correspondence, to confirm the published reports.[13]

To be fully credible, however, information had to be disinterested as well as coming from a trusted source. Reliable news was only that which was "uncontaminated by intrigue, private views, a party spirit, or foreign influence," as Elbridge Gerry put it. A vivid illustration of the process by which the network sought to construct this sort of information was the effort by Adams just after his election as president to determine whether France was likely to go to war with the United States. Adams first attempted to "read" the intentions of the French government by studying the progress of commerce raiding in the West Indies. He knew that privateers in the West Indies often acted on the basis of private directions from their government or its agents. Even if the French government was not revealing its intentions to the United States through official diplomatic channels, its intentions might be divined from the behavior of its citizens. This information, if one could collect it, would therefore be more accurate and less liable to "intrigue" than the government's official statements. So on January 19, Adams sent letters to two trusted correspondents, Thomas Welsh and John Trumbull (the latter had studied law with him in 1773–1774) stating that France might "declare war against us or force a defensive war upon us," and asking them to send him the latest news regarding French and Spanish treatment of U.S. "commerce in the West Indies." Their replies indicated no upsurge in privateering activity.[14]

Adams's second strategy for acquiring disinterested information was

13. Fred Delius to JQA, June 28, 1797, Adams Family Papers ("information"); JQA to JA, June 7, 1797, *Adams Writings*, ed. Ford, 2: 179 ("necessary"); Elbridge Gerry to JA, Jan. 30, 1797, Adams Family Papers; JQA to JA, Mar. 18, 1797, *Adams Writings*, ed. Ford, 2: 142. For other examples of dismissal of rumors, see JQA to JA, Feb. 3, 1797, *Adams Writings*, ed. Ford, 2: 103; and Joseph Pitcairn to JQA, Apr. 8, 1797, Adams Family Papers.

14. Elbridge Gerry to JA, Apr. 25, 1797, Adams Family Papers; JA to Welsh, Jan. 19, 1797, Adams Family Papers; and JA to John Trumbull, Jan. 19, 1797, Adams Family Papers. The French government often issued secret orders; see, e.g., Pickering to JA, May 1, 1797, Adams Family Papers. On Trumbull, see Ferling, *Adams*, 426; and Edward Watts, "John Trumbull" in *American National Biography*.

to tap the collective knowledge of the business community, this time with the help of Josiah Quincy, Jr. He knew that if businessmen thought war was imminent, the price of maritime insurance would rise and merchants would try to limit their exposure to the increased risks. So on January 23, Adams wrote to Quincy to ask what reaction, if any, had registered in Boston insurance and stock market to the news that France had refused to receive Charles Cotesworth Pinckney as the new U.S. representative. Quincy replied that he had spoken with "one or two principal underwriters of an office alledged to be in the opposition," who had declared that one could not get insurance for voyages to the British West Indies. But Quincy thought this was the "language of men well disposed at least to encourage the idea of a French war, and not an opinion resulting from any investigation of danger or calculation of chances." Their opinions could be discounted, in other words, because their political interests were so strong as to make them unable to reliably estimate the risk of war based on their commercial interests. After consulting with what he felt were more reliable sources, Quincy reported that there was in fact no indication of any appreciable rise in interest rates as a result of the "hostile relation[s]" between the two countries. He hammered this conclusion home by adding that he detected no "general sentiment pervading the mercantile interest . . . that a war between France and America is a thing probable." This "sentiment," because it was "general," in principle avoided any taint of individual bias. The network thus worked together, even before John Adams had taken office as president, to produce useful information about France's intentions toward the United States.[15]

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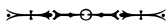
The private network's mettle was tested more fully as soon as Adams assumed office in March, 1797, when he found himself faced with a major diplomatic crisis: The French government's rejection of Charles Cotesworth Pinckney. The crisis had been brewing since the previous administration. In July, 1796, Washington had recalled Republican James Monroe from his post as Minister to France and sent Pinckney, a

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15. Josiah Quincy to JA, Feb. 2, 1797, Adams Family Papers; and JA to Josiah Quincy, Jan. 23, 1797, Adams Family Papers. Of course, Quincy's winnowing of witnesses could itself introduce bias, but that is a danger of any effort at objectivity.

staunch Federalist, to replace him. But when Pinckney arrived in France, the Directory (France's plural executive) refused to receive him and, in December, expelled him from the country. This "dishonorable" treatment was a major breach of diplomatic protocol. More seriously, it could be seen as a violation of the law of nations (i.e., international law). According to the leading theorist of the period, Swiss jurist Emmerich de Vattel, the law of nations guaranteed every "sovereign state" the right to send embassies and have them received. In Vattel's view, a government that refused an ambassador without excellent reasons "commits a crime" worthy of "severe punishment"—up to and including war. So when the news of Pinckney's rejection reached the United States in mid-March, 1797, Adams had to decide whether to interpret the rejection as a violation of the law of nations, and thus a just cause of war, or as merely a negotiating tactic, to be met with forbearance and fresh negotiations.[16]

Adams's deliberations on this question show that he turned first to his private network and suggest that he gave greater weight to its advice, shaped by shared assumptions and principles, than to that of his cabinet. This modifies the dominant opinion in the literature, which holds that Adams's decision to reopen negotiations was shaped primarily by the

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16. Pickering to JQA, Mar. 15, 1797, Adams Family Papers. Emmerich de Vattel, *The Law of Nations; or, Principles of the Law of Nature; Applied to the Conduct and Affairs of Nations and Sovereigns* (London, 1793), 412, 415, 422 and Book III, Ch. 3, passim. Official word from Pinckney of his refusal arrived on Mar. 23, 1797, for which see James McHenry to George Washington, Mar. 24, 1797, *Papers of George Washington: Retirement Series*, ed. W. W. Abbot (4 vols., Charlottesville, VA, 1997–1998), 1: 47. For an account of Pinckney's mission, see Alexander DeConde, *Entangling Alliance: Politics and Diplomacy under George Washington* (Durham, NC, 1958), 383–91, and his own correspondence in *American State Papers: Foreign Relations* (1832–1861; repr. Buffalo, NY, 1998), 2: 5ff. The French government's perspective on the diplomatic crisis, which does not figure in this article, has been well studied in the works by Bowman, Stinchcombe, and DeConde cited throughout and William Stinchcombe, "The Diplomacy of the WXYZ Affair," *William and Mary Quarterly* 34 (Oct. 1977), 590–617. For excellent overviews of Vattel's theories, as well as his relations with earlier thinkers, see Peter S. Onuf and Nicholas G. Onuf, *Federal Union, Modern World: The Law of Nations in an Age of Revolutions, 1776–1814* (Madison, WI, 1993), 11–19; Daniel Lang, *Foreign Policy in the Early Republic: The Law of Nations and the Balance of Power* (Baton Rouge, LA, 1985), 16–19; and Richard Tuck, *The Rights of War and Peace: Political Thought and the International Order from Grotius to Kant* (Oxford, UK, 1999), 158–65 and 193–94.

advice proffered by his cabinet at the secret urging of Alexander Hamilton. In fact, Adams began consulting with his private network in January, even before there was firm information about whether Pinckney had been rejected. During the first months of 1797, he and his circle decided that France's leaders were not following the law of nations, but instead pursuing a policy driven by pure national interest. The United States, they thought, could continue negotiations so long as it did not have to sacrifice either of its key interests, which they defined as national honor and independence. Information provided by the network helped confirm this analysis, so that by April 14, when Adams finally solicited the cabinet's opinion, he had most likely already decided to send a new mission to France. Yet he still took careful note of his secretaries' advice and reasoning and incorporated their arguments into the May 16 speech in which he presented his policy of new negotiations to Congress. In this first episode, then, Adams showed his confidence in his private network while also integrating the advice and information it gave him with the contributions of the official network.[17]

For the Adamses' circle, there could be no question of judging France's conduct on the basis of the law of nations. Even before the news of Pinckney's rejection reached the United States, members of the informal network did not think the French government felt itself bound by those rules. In a letter to John Quincy Adams in early 1797, Joseph Pitcairn asserted that "the musty volumes of Puffendorf and Vatel [sic] with all their antiquated adherence to rule" were no longer relevant. Another writer, in a letter to John Adams a month later, dismissed Vattel's maxims as a "compilation of discordant precedents from antient

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17. For interpretations of events that see the secretaries' advice playing a dominant role in Adams's response, see William C. Stinchcombe, *The XYZ Affair* (Westport, CT, 1980), 19–22; Alexander DeConde, *The Quasi-War: The Politics and Diplomacy of the Undeclared War with France, 1797–1801* (New York, 1966), 18–20, 67, 80–89; Albert H. Bowman, *The Struggle for Neutrality: Franco-American Diplomacy during the Federalist Era* (Knoxville, TN, 1974), 279–84; Smith, *John Adams*, 922–34; Elkins and McKitrick, *Age of Federalism*, 544–46; and Gerard H. Clarfield, *Timothy Pickering and American Diplomacy, 1795–1800* (Columbia, MO, 1969), 107. On John Adams's queries to his cabinet, see JA notes, dated Mar. 19, 1797, Adams Family Papers; and JA to Heads of Department, Apr. 14, 1797, *Adams Works,* ed. Adams, 8: 540–41. There is no evidence in the Adams Papers of a reply from any of the cabinet secretaries to his queries of Mar. 19, suggesting they were not sent.

usages." Writing to his father in January, 1797, John Quincy asserted that the lawless French government would not hesitate to use "*any means*" to achieve what it regarded as a "desirable end." Pickering, in turn, observed repeatedly to the President that the French had "laid aside all the rules of fair procedure which have hitherto directed and still govern the other civilized nations of the world."[18]

The cabinet secretaries Wolcott and Lee, whose opinion Adams sought in mid April, did not share the private network's skepticism about the relevance of the law of nations. Wolcott asserted confidently that the obligations of international law were "demandable of the United States as well as of France." Lee echoed Wolcott's claim and spelled out in more detail the potential legal consequences of France's violation of the law of nations:

If a nation to whom a Minister Plenipotentiary is sent by another nation, refuse him residence, it is a just cause of displeasure, but if he be refused an audience and the refusal circumstanced with rudeness and indignity, the offense is more serious. *The latter has been sometimes productive of war and in the opinion of some has been thought a sufficient cause of war*, it being considered by them a violation of one of the perfect rights of an independant nation.

Lee went on to say that he did not think France's refusal of Pinckney was "of itself a just cause of war." The clear implication of his analysis, nonetheless, was that he believed the law of nations to be applicable to France, and that the French government could be condemned for not following it. Oliver Wolcott, reaching the same conclusion, was more blunt. "The personal treatment which Mr. Pinckney received in Paris," he wrote indignantly, "was . . . a violation of the Law of Nations."[19]

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18. Joseph Pitcairn to JQA, Jan. 22, 1797, Adams Family Papers; and Thomas Law to JA, Feb. 26, 1797 ("compilation"), Adams Family Papers. JQA to JA, Jan. 14, 1797, *Adams Writings*, ed. Ford, 2: 87. Pickering to JA, May 1, 1797 [Memo], 21, in Adams Family Papers. See also Pickering to JA, July 17, 1797, Adams Family Papers. In October, JQA told Pickering that France "has disclaimed most of the received and established ideas upon the laws of nations and considered herself as liberated from all the obligations towards other states." See JQA to Pickering, Oct. 31, 1797, *Adams Writings*, ed. Ford, 2: 219

19. Wolcott to JA, Apr. 21, 1797, Adams Family Papers; and Charles Lee to JA [Memo], Apr. 30, 1797, Adams Family Papers. Secretary McHenry, for his part, argued that the law of nations was not relevant to judging France's actions, but his argument was based on a misapprehension: "It is presumed," he wrote,

In his private statements, John Adams suggested that he was inclined to side with his private advisors and dismiss the law of nations as a useful way to think about French diplomacy. In a letter sent to Henry Knox shortly before the news of Pinckney's rejection arrived in the United States, Adams complained that the French "have no other rule but to give reputation to their tools, and to destroy the reputation of all who will not be their tools." They think, he wrote, "that France ought to govern all nations," and they were willing to do whatever it took to achieve that end. Months later, Adams remarked darkly that the French government's maxim seemed to be, "There is no treaty [binding] on a nation that is dying of hunger." He attributed this maxim to his onetime friend the Abbé Gabriel Bonnot de Mably, another celebrated writer on diplomacy. Mably had argued, in a well-known foreign policy manual, that each nation's diplomacy was and ought to be guided by the pursuit of its own interest. A nation's needs, in this conception, easily overrode its treaties and commitments in international law. By mid 1798, Adams had grown so doubtful of the value of the law of nations that he dismissed outright the "visionary . . . projects of universal and perpetual peace, which some ingenious and benevolent writers have amused themselves in composing."[20]

If the law of nations was not driving the French government's behavior, what was? Adams and his private network believed that the Directory was consulting France's "interest" in determining its diplomatic course, and that the U.S. government should do the same. This view was widely shared by members of the private network. William Smith observed to Adams that "nations, like many individuals, are actuated in

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"that every nation is free to receive or reject a minister sent to it by another nation. The right to send by no means imposes [an] obligation to receive." On this incorrect view, the Directory's rejection of Pinckney was not a major offense at all. See McHenry to JA, Apr. 29, 1797, Adams Family Papers.

20. JA to Henry Knox, Mar. 30, 1797, *Adams Works*, ed. Adams, 8: 536; JA to Timothy Pickering, Oct. 14, 1797, *Adams Works*, ed. Adams, 554 (Adams quoted the maxim as "Il n'y a point de traité pour une nation qui meurt de faim"); JA, "To the Inhabitants of Dedham and Other Towns in the County of Norfolk, Massachusetts," July 14, 1798, *Adams Works*, ed. Adams, 9: 209. For Vattel as one of the writers on perpetual peace, see the discussion of Immanuel Kant, *Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Essay* (1795), in Tuck, *Rights of War and Peace*, 209. On Mably, see J. K. Wright, *A Classical Republican in Eighteenth-Century France: The Political Thought of Mably* (Stanford, CA, 1997).

their friendships towards each other wholly by interest." John Quincy frequently expressed similar opinions. In late 1796, he observed to Joseph Pitcairn, as though stating the obvious, that "interest" was "the only honest language upon a political concern." A few months later, in February, 1797, he wrote to his father that he had "conversed with several intelligent men here, engaged in the public affairs" and that all had agreed that France was justified in capturing American vessels because it could help them achieve their main foreign policy goal, forcing Britain to sue for peace. John Quincy explained that, as far as they were concerned, "rigorous justice is not always practicable among nations, and that when policy prescribes a certain system, it cannot be expected that great regard will be paid to the rights and interests of a neutral nation." France's pursuit of its interests, in short, justified it in violating the "rights and interests" of *other* nations. Whether one liked it or not, interest—and interest alone—had become the only arbiter of right in international relations.[21]

Adams and his network identified two main interests that they believed should drive U.S. policy toward France in the wake of the rejection of Pinckney. The first was maintaining the peace. Virtually every political leader agreed that keeping the United States at peace was highly desirable. Indeed, it was one of the few points on which the High Federalist Timothy Pickering, who reminded Adams in mid-1797 of the "inestimable value of peace," could agree with Thomas Jefferson, the leading Republican. A letter written by Abigail Adams to her sons on

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21. William Smith to JA, Mar. 1, 1797, Adams Family Papers; JQA to Pitcairn, Nov. 13, 1796, *Adams Writings*, ed. Ford, 2: 41; JQA to JA, Feb. 16, 1797, *Adams Writings*, ed. Ford, 121–22. For other examples of JQA using the language of interest, see Ford, ed., *Adams Writings*, 2: 13, 18, 149, 184–86. The belief that "interest" was the driving force of international relations jibed with Mably's theory of international relations. Mably argued that the goal of statecraft was to determine the "true" or "fundamental interests" of the state and to pursue them at all costs; see Abbé Gabriel Bonnot de Mably, *Principes des Négociations, pour servir d'introduction au droit public de l'Europe, fondé sur les traités*, vol. 5, *Oeuvres complètes de l'Abbé Mably* (London, 1789), 17. His works were well known to the network. In June of 1797, Rufus King asked John Quincy Adams to send him a copy of Mably's treatise on foreign policy. A few months later, John Adams suggested to Timothy Pickering that "all Frenchmen" shared his "old friend" Mably's views. See Rufus King to JQA, June 16, 1797, Adams Family Papers; and JA to Timothy Pickering, Oct. 14, 1797, *Adams Works*, ed. Adams, 8: 554.

June 20, 1797, from Philadelphia, suggests that John Adams concurred. "If peace depend upon our government," she wrote, likely speaking for him as well, "it will be preserved, *there is but one wish, it is to avoid war* if it can be done without prostrating our nations honour, or sacrificing our independence."[22]

As the June letter suggests, however, the Adamses and their network did not regard peace as the sole U.S. interest. Just as important, in their view, was maintaining the nation's "honour" and "independence." The nation's honor, as Adams conceived it, was similar to that of an individual: "reputation is of as much importance to nations, in proportion as to individuals," he wrote in 1798, and "honor is a higher interest than reputation. . . . What is animal life, or national existence, without them?" Just as for an individual, a nation's honor depended on the nation's keeping its word—which, in the case of a state, consisted of its treaties. Referring in a March, 1797, letter to Henry Knox to the Directory's hints that the United States ought to abrogate the Jay Treaty with Britain, he wrote that he would not accept "a violation of our faith" in order to achieve peace. In a letter to John Quincy soon after, Adams reiterated that he would "endeavor to reconcile, provided that no violation of faith, no stain upon honor, is exacted." Keeping its treaties, then, was one of the nation's fundamental interests. Only by doing so could it ensure that other nations would continue to see it as a worthy and reliable partner.[23]

The Adams correspondents shared the widespread belief that internal divisions, fostered and encouraged by foreign powers, posed the greatest threat to the nation's independence. This belief was grounded in early American statesmen's shared classical republican heritage, which identified internal divisions as the greatest danger to a republic. Avoiding or at

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22. Pickering to JA, May 1, 1797 [Memo], Adams Family Papers; and AA to TBA, Jun. 20, 1797, Adams Family Papers. Dumas Malone asserts that Jefferson's "main concern was and continued to be the maintenance of peace." See Dumas Malone, *Jefferson and the Ordeal of Liberty* (Charlottesville, VA, 2005), 369. Henry Knox also asserted that "every experiment which would afford the least hope" of peace ought to be tried; Henry Knox to JA, Mar. 19, 1797, *Adams Works*, ed. Adams, 8 :533.

23. To the Students of New Jersey College (n.d.), *Adams Works*, ed. Adams, 9: 206; JA to Knox, Mar. 30, 1797, *Adams Works*, ed. Adams, 8: 535; JA to JQA, Mar. 31, 1797, *Adams Works*, ed. Adams, 8: 537. On discourses of honor in the early republic, see Freeman, *Affairs of Honor*, passim.

least managing "divisions fatal to our peace," as John Adams put it, was widely agreed to be an essential goal of U.S. policy. (Or, as Joseph Pitcairn had it, "Union at home is our egis abroad.") Even on this point, though, the network's analysis differed at the margins from that of the cabinet. For Secretary McHenry, an actual invasion by France was a distinct possibility that posed a crucial existential threat to U.S. independence. He suggested as much to Adams in April, arguing that Britain might sue for peace and leave the United States "alone to contend with the conquerors of Europe." In a letter to George Washington two months later, he argued that France might force England to yield back Canada, putting a French army on the U.S. border. Adams and his private network, on the other hand, rejected the idea that U.S. independence was threatened by French arms. "Let her triumph upon the continent," John Quincy wrote to Pitcairn in early 1797. "Between us and her, thank Heaven, there is a great gulf." John Adams put it even more bluntly in a letter to McHenry the following year: "There is no more prospect of seeing a French army here," he wrote, "than there is in Heaven." For the network, preventing France from exploiting internal divisions in the United States was the key to protecting the nation's independence.[24]

Given the principles he and the network had outlined, the question Adams had to answer in March and April, 1797 was whether further negotiations with the French government would smudge the "honor" of the United States or compromise its "independence." By the middle of April, before he consulted with his cabinet, two trusted correspondents had supplied Adams with enough information to judge that the network's

24. JA Message to Congress, May 16, 1797, *Adams Works,* ed. Adams, 9: 114; Pitcairn to JQA, Feb. 1, 1797, Adams Family Papers; McHenry to JA [Memo], 29 Apr 1797, Adams Family Papers; McHenry to Washington, June 15, 1797, *Papers of George Washington: Retirement Series,* 1: 188; JQA to Pitcairn, Jan. 31, 1797, *Adams Writings,* ed. Ford, 2: 97; JA to McHenry, Oct. 22, 1798, *Adams Works,* ed. Adams, 8: 613. On faction, and especially John Adams's obsession with its dangers, see Elkins and McKitrick, *Age of Federalism,* 531–37 and 533. Note that McHenry's invasion fear was his own addition to the memorandum, most of which was actually written by Alexander Hamilton; see Bernard C. Steiner, *The Life and Correspondence of James McHenry* (New York, 1979), 216–22. For his worries about the prospect of invasion even before 1797, see Steiner, *Life and Correspondence,* 182.

conditions had been met. Three recently arrived letters from John Quincy Adams reported that the "design" of the Directory, in refusing to receive Pinckney, was indeed to instigate a "rupture of our treaty with Great Britain." But the French government, in his view, was not committed to that goal: it would be content as well to "influence the American election, or to embarrass the new administration." Moreover, John Quincy reported, his informants indicated that the French government would not push the United States beyond its tolerance and into war. France's hostile acts were "bluster," he wrote; they had "no inclination to increase the number of their enemies." John Adams singled out one of these "fine" letters for praise in a mid-April note to Abigail. Elbridge Gerry offered a concurring opinion in a series of letters to Adams in March and April. Gerry argued that the rejection of Pinckney was an attempt on the part of the French government to counteract an imagined Federalist plot to "fill all the foreign office with antigallicans." He interpreted the Directory's behavior as a basically reasonable response to the information they had: It just happened that the incorrect information they had received resulted in inappropriate and hostile-seeming behavior.[25]

On May 16, Adams delivered a message to Congress in which he formally announced Pinckney's rejection and proposed a new mission to France. It offers an elegant illustration of how public and private networks and advice fit into Adams's political decision-making. Adams first borrowed a page from Lee and Wolcott by framing Pinckney's rejection as a violation of international law: "The right of embassy is well known and established by the law and usage of nations. The refusal on the part of France to receive our minister, is . . . to treat us neither as allies, nor as friends, nor as a sovereign State." But, he continued, "more alarming than the refusal of a minister" was the threat of an attack on U.S. inter-

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25. JQA to JA, Jan. 14, 1797, *Adams Writings*, ed. Ford, 2: 82 ("design"); JQA to JA, Dec. 24, 1796, *Adams Writings*, ed. Ford, 64–65 ("influence"); JQA to JA, Jan. 14, 1797, *Adams Writings*, ed. Ford, 84 ("bluster"). JA to AA, Apr. 13, 1797, Adams Family Papers. Gerry to JA, Apr. 25, 1797, Adams Family Papers. See also Gerry to JA, Mar. 8, 1797, Adams Family Papers; and Wolcott to JA, Apr. 21, 1797, Adams Family Papers. When JQA reversed himself on the prospect of war with France in March, he explained that the Directory was inclined to do so "unless the Americans will submit to sacrifice their interest, their honor, and their independence." JQA to JA, *Adams Writings*, ed. Ford, 2: 142.

ests, especially its "independence." He then hammered home this interest-based analysis in looking at every facet of the situation. The diplomatic crisis had begun, Adams said, because the Directory thought the United States was acting against "the interests of France." In crafting a response, he urged the representatives to carefully consider the "rights, duties, interests, and honor of the nation." Yet so long as France respected its "national honor, character, and interest" and "neither the honor nor the interest of the United States" would be compromised, he concluded, further negotiation was desirable.[26]

The decision to reopen negotiations reveals the complex intertwining of two separate networks of advisors and informants in Adams's diplomatic practice. His first step in the crisis, as we have seen, was to consult with his private advisors. Interpreting France's behavior through the lens of national interest, they came to the conclusion that the United States should continue to negotiate. Only once this analysis was in place, and he had privately received information that allowed him to interpret France's intentions, did Adams consult his official advisors. This suggests, though it cannot be definitively proven, that Adams had already decided to give negotiations another try before he queried his cabinet. Yet in his public statement to Congress and the people in May, Adams was careful to incorporate the cabinet's reasoning as well: Indeed, he began by invoking the law of nations before settling into an interest-based analysis. So even when Adams listened to his private network, it did not make him deaf to the advice of his formal advisors. The networks coexisted, providing Adams with two separate—and in this case, concurring—opinions.

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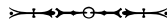
Having decided to dispatch a new mission to France, Adams had to settle on whom to send. Choosing the new mission proved to be a knotty problem, or rather series of problems. Should he send a single representative or a group of emissaries? Should they be Francophiles or Francophobes, or some combination of the two? Should he or they be high-ranking government officials or not? Over the course of the spring, Adams made four different proposals for the mission before ultimately

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26. JA, "Speech to Both Houses of Congress," May 16, 1797, *Adams Works*, ed. Adams, 9: 112–14.

sending a politically mixed three-man commission, comprising Pinckney, John Marshall, and Gerry. Most scholarly analysis of these deliberations has interpreted Adams's actions primarily through the lens of party politics. The private network offers another optic, which allows us to see how personal relationships and trust played a crucial role in Adams's deliberations. Though bonds of trust did not trump partisan politics, choosing individuals whom he trusted enabled Adams to bend to political pressures without damaging the likelihood of a successful mission. Adams's deliberations also provide some additional insight into the structure of trust within the network. Rather than consisting primarily of one-on-one bonds, it shows, the network was an extended web of trust-based relationships that both reached outside the circle of Adams's immediate friends and deepened the bonds within it.

Adams first considered the possibility of sending Vice President Thomas Jefferson as a one-man mission. Jefferson was one of Adams's old friends and allies from the days of the Revolutionary War. And though they were already on divergent political paths by early 1797, Adams still considered him a trusted friend. The idea, moreover, was suggested to him by so many people that Adams remarked that "the thought is a natural one." But he soon decided that it would not do to send Jefferson, invoking familiar concerns about the nation's honor and reputation. "Upon more mature reflection," he wrote in a letter to Gerry explaining his decision, "it would be a degradation of our government in the eyes of our own people, as well as of all Europe" to send the Vice President on a "diplomatic errand." Doing so would show the United States to be a "pitiful country indeed." Jefferson himself also proved unwilling to accept the mission, possibly on the same grounds.[27]

Once it became clear that sending Jefferson was out of the question, Adams returned to the idea of a three-person mission. He first floated the idea of sending Pinckney, Republican leader James Madison, and Elbridge Gerry. This mission, dominated by Francophiles, seems to have represented an effort on Adams's part to win over both Republicans and the French government. It also ran directly counter to his cabinet's

27. JA to Gerry, Apr. 6, 1797, *Adams Works*, ed. Adams, 8: 538–40. In March, after seeing Jefferson, John made his famous enigmatic remark to Abigail that "he is as he was." See JA to AA, Mar. 13, 1797, *Letters of John Adams, Addressed to His Wife*, ed. Charles Francis Adams (2 vols., Boston, 1841), 2: 250. On Jefferson's refusal to go to France, see Bowman, *Struggle*, 279–80.

advice. Both Attorney General Lee and Secretary of the Treasury Wolcott had expressed opposition in their April memoranda to adding Republicans to the mission. Wolcott even spent several pages trying to convince Adams not to stack the peace mission with individuals who had particular "credit and influence with France"—a category that certainly included Madison and Gerry. When the cabinet then expressed its entirely predictable opposition to this Francophile mission, Adams immediately withdrew the proposal and suggested instead two staunch Federalists, Francis Dana and John Marshall, to join Pinckney in Europe. The cabinet and leading Federalists were pleased with this new proposal; Republicans, predictably, were disgusted. But when Dana refused to serve, citing his poor health, Adams turned back to Gerry to replace him and sent his nomination to the Senate over the cabinet's reiterated objections.[28]

From the point of view of ideology, Adams's four proposed missions were a model of inconsistency. He first proposed two Republican-dominated missions, then whipsawed back along the ideological spectrum, at the urging of his cabinet, to an all-Federalist mission. When a chance occurrence gave him the opportunity to create an ideologically mixed mission, he took it over his cabinet's strenuous objections. Historians looking at Adams's actions through the lens of partisanship and political ideology have inevitably accused him of vacillating, weak leadership. In this interpretation, Adams's first two proposals were a sop to Republicans, who wanted to send a mission of Francophiles that would have the Directory's ear. He then "yielded," as historian William Stinchcombe put it, "to the cabinet . . . a step that gave the commission geographical but not political balance." The third, all-Federalist mission reflected the strongly anti-French agenda of the cabinet and its secret advisor, Alexander Hamilton. Dana's refusal of the nomination gave Adams the chance to stubbornly renominate his friend Gerry, whom he knew the cabinet opposed, and partially restore his original plan. The ideologically mixed final mission, Stinchcombe and others suggest, was thus a chance outcome that owed little to Adams's weak leadership, which allowed partisans on both sides to dictate his actions.[29]

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28. For a narrative of the selection process, see Bowman, *Struggle*, 280–84. On the Cabinet's reaction to Gerry, see Elkins and McKitrick, *Age of Federalism*, 555–56; Clarfield, *Timothy Pickering and the American Republic*, 184–85.

29. For this analysis, see especially Stinchcombe, *The XYZ Affair*, 22. See also James R. Sharp, *American Politics in the Early Republic: The New Nation in Crisis*

If we look at his decision in the terms of the private network, however, the picture is different: trust, as the unifying principle that ran through all of his deliberations, makes it possible to read them as both deliberate and coherent. Marshall, Dana, Gerry, and Madison stood at very different points on the political spectrum, but all of them were connected to Adams's private network, which made him ready to entrust them with the sensitive mission to France regardless of their partisan allegiances. This is obvious in the cases of Marshall, Dana, and Gerry, all of whom were old friends. Madison's inclusion is a bit more puzzling, since he was neither Adams's close friend nor, by the late 1790s, a political ally or fellow-traveler. Yet as we have seen in the case of John Quincy Adams's correspondents, trust in the network was not simply a matter of one-on-one personal acquaintance. Individuals in the network trusted not only their own friends, but also their friends' friends (though personal credit, like financial credit, was somewhat discounted at second hand). This fact helps explain why Adams proposed Madison in particular. Like everyone else in Philadelphia, Adams was aware that Madison was Jefferson's closest political ally and collaborator. With Jefferson himself unwilling to go, choosing Madison was a way for Adams to make a gesture toward the Republican party while keeping the appointment somewhat within the orbit of his private network.

The structure of trust within the network also played a more complex role in the nominations of Dana and Gerry than is evident at first glance. John himself had solid relationships with both Dana and Gerry. But he was also strongly connected to them through Abigail. She had known both men for as long as John and had corresponded independently with Gerry and with Dana's wife, Elizabeth, since the early 1780s. Moreover, Abigail was involved in her husband's deliberations about the mission. In addition to commenting extensively on the nominees (including in letters to her sister), she participated actively in recruiting them. Shortly after John wrote to Francis Dana to ask him to serve, Abigail wrote separately to Elizabeth, urging her to let her husband take the position. She wrote to Gerry immediately after he accepted the post, telling him that she had taken a "sincere . . . interest . . . in the result of your deliberations" and affirming the "great pleasure" his acceptance had caused her. Her strong connections to the two emissaries offered one

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(New Haven, CT, 1993), 164–66; Ferling, *John Adams*, 345; and Elkins and McKitrick, *Age of Federalism*, 555–56.

more point of assurance to John that the two Massachusetts men, in spite of their different political affiliations, could both be trusted to carry out the mission to France.[30]

   John Adams's deliberations show that networks of personal trust alone did not determine whom he considered appointing as emissaries to France. Party politics, the advice of his cabinet, and his own stubbornness all contributed to Adams's repeated self-reversals in the spring of 1797. Yet in spite of their widely varying ideological positions, the emissaries he proposed were all to one degree or another linked to his circle of trusted advisors and informants. As such, Adams felt he could count on them to serve the nation honestly, regardless of their political affiliation. Private interpersonal connections and relationships of trust built through his private epistolary network, in other words, did not override partisanship; they gave Adams a way to bend to it without sacrificing the greater interests of the nation.

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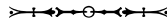
A somewhat altered picture of President John Adams's diplomacy emerges from this rereading of episodes in the Quasi-War through the lens of his private epistolary network. Scholars have argued that the cabinet's advice and influence were a dominant factor in Adams's decision to reopen negotiations with France and his selection of emissaries to send on the new mission. Yet as we have seen, Adams solicited advice and information about whether to reopen negotiations from the private network well before he consulted with his cabinet, and privileged the network's reasoning over the cabinet's. When it came time to pick the members of the new mission, moreover, Adams negotiated among the competing partisan agendas by drawing on individuals in whom his private network gave him reason to have confidence. At the same time as it shows that the influence of the cabinet and Hamilton has been signifi-

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30. AA to Gerry, July 7, 1797, Adams Family Papers; and AA to Elizabeth Dana, Jun. 5, 1797, Adams Family Papers. See also the elegant analysis of AA's letter to Dana in Gelles, *Abigail Adams*, 140–41. AA's correspondence with Elizabeth Dana dated to 1781, at least, and her correspondence with Gerry began in 1780; see AA to Gerry, Mar. 13, 1780, *Adams Family Correspondence*, 3: 297–300 and Elizabeth Dana to AA, Mar. 6, 1781, *Adams Family Correspondence*, 4: 89. For her comments on the nominees, see AA to Mary Cranch, Jun. 3, 1797, in *New Letters*, ed. Mitchell, 94.

cantly overstated, it suggests that other figures—like Joseph Pitcairn, Josiah Quincy, Thomas Welsh, and their informants—played a neglected but very important role in shaping the principles and providing the information that Adams used in shaping his diplomatic course. These individuals may well repay further study in future work on the Adams network.

These specific revisions aside, the model of focusing on private networks and their political function may be profitably extended to the politics of the early republic more broadly. In his reliance on a private network for information and advice, Adams was the rule rather than the exception among early U.S. political leaders. George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, to name only two of the most obvious figures, created and relied upon similar unofficial networks. The famous Jefferson–Madison collaboration, for instance, was entirely unofficial for decades, until Jefferson appointed his friend Secretary of State in 1801. These similarities suggest that due attention to the role played by private networks may enable us to see diplomatic practice and political decision-making anew and to recover the contributions of some marginal and minor figures. At the same time, the uncannily similar way that public figures in eighteenth-century Europe relied on private networks suggests the need for more work on the European roots of early American diplomatic practice. Though the European basis of diplomatic theory in the early United States is well known, relatively little work has been done to connect the actual practice of diplomacy in the early American republic to it European antecedents. This would complement and extend recent scholarship that has demonstrated the similarities between early modern Europe and early American political practice in studies of electioneering, festive culture, and the workings of Congress.[31]

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31. Discussions of the early republic in relation to early modern Europe appear in three influential recent books; see Freeman, *Affairs of Honor*, xxi–xxiv; David Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes: The Making of American Nationalism, 1776–1820* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1997), 18–24; and Simon P. Newman, *Parades and Politics of the Street: Festive Culture in the Early American Republic* (Philadelphia, 1997), 2–9. See also Andrew W. Robertson, "Voting Rights and Voting Acts: Electioneering Ritual, 1790–1820" in *Beyond the Founders: New Approaches to the Political History of the Early American Republic*, ed. Jeffrey L. Pasley, Andrew W. Robertson, and David Waldstreicher (Chapel Hill, NC, 2004), 58–59. Felix Gilbert's classic study, *To the Farewell Address: Ideas of Early American Foreign Policy* (Princeton, NJ, 1961), traced the intellectual bases of the early

Extending the methods developed in studies of early modern knowledge networks to high politics in North America may also open up new questions for historians of science and the republic of letters. Scholars in those fields have begun in recent years to examine the relationship between knowledge networks and the networks created by states and empires. By showing how politicians used strategies similar to those employed by scientists, this essay further erodes the conceptual boundary between the two kinds of networks. Indeed, it raises the question of whether scholarly networks were that distinctive at all. Perhaps information networks, rather than scholarly ones, are the real object of study. The essay also suggests, however, that the rules for producing knowledge in the political sphere did differ from the prevailing rules in scientific milieux. Politicians like Adams had to take seriously information and advice from public channels that they regarded as less reliable than their own networks—something few scientists were obliged to do. Paradoxically, Adams's private network also rested on a basis of much more deeply rooted trust relationships than those which held together many scientific and literary networks. A new history of knowledge networks, which aims to see the field whole, would have to account for these variations.[32]

Finally, though it has not been its focus, this essay suggests the need for political historians to pay renewed attention to the shaping role of early modern epistolary practices in the politics of the new republic. Many of the features of the Adams network that made it so useful for

republic's foreign policy back to Europe, but he said very little about the practice of diplomacy. See also Onuf and Onuf, *Federal Union*. For examples of Washington's reliance on networks of friends, see John E. Ferling, *First of Men: A Life of George Washington* (Knoxville, TN, 1988), 377–79.

32. Of recent studies that connect national and imperial networks with scholarly ones, see in particular Jacob Soll, *The Information Master: Jean-Baptiste Colbert's Secret State Intelligence System* (Ann Arbor, MI, 2009); James Delbourgo and Nicholas Dew, eds., *Science and Empire in the Atlantic World* (New York, 2008). This is distinct from histories of the relationship between ideologies of power and knowledge, for which the locus classicus is Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer, *Leviathan and the Air-Pump: Hobbes, Boyle and the Experimental Life* (Princeton, NJ, 1989). See also Margaret C. Jacob, *Living the Enlightenment: Freemasonry and Politics in Eighteenth Century Europe* (New York, 1991) and Pierre-Yves Beaurepaire, *L'Espace des francs-maçons. Une sociabilité européenne au XVIIIe siècle* (Rennes, France, 2003).

diplomatic work—including its collective standards of reliability, its basis in trust, its collection and filtering of information—were linked directly to characteristics, habits and customs of early modern letter-writing. One might even say that the Adams network was successful because of its underlying epistolary habits. This, in turn, suggests the need for further research into the epistolary practices of early American politicians and a closer study, drawing on the literature on early modern epistolarity, of how it shaped American political culture.[33]

33. See Konstantin Dierks, *In My Power: Letter Writing and Communications in Early America* (Philadelphia, 2009); Kate Davies, *Catharine Macaulay and Mercy Otis Warren: The Revolutionary Atlantic and the Politics of Gender* (Oxford, UK, 2005); Dena Goodman, *Becoming a Woman in the Age of Letters* (Ithaca, NY, 2009); Roger Chartier et al., eds., *La correspondance: les usages de la lettre au XIXe siècle* (Paris, 1991); Eve Tavor Bannett, *Empire of Letters: Letter Manuals and Transatlantic Correspondence, 1688–1820* (Cambridge, UK, 2005). See also Gelles, *Abigail Adams.*