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John Adams and the Spirit of Liberty

C. Bradley Thompson

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America's finest eighteenth-century student of political science, John Adams is also the least studied of the Revolution's key figures. By the time he became our second president, no American had written more about our government and not even Jefferson or Madison had read as widely about questions of human nature, natural right, political organization, and constitutional construction. Yet this staunch constitutionalist is perceived by many as having become reactionary in his later years and his ideas have been largely disregarded.

In the first major work on Adams's political thought in over thirty years, C. Bradley Thompson takes issue with the notion that Adams's thought is irrelevant to the development of American ideas. Focusing on Adams's major writings, Thompson elucidates and reevaluates his political and constitutional thought by interpreting it within the tradition of political philosophy stretching from Plato to Montesquieu.

This major revisionist study shows that the distinction Adams drew between "principles of liberty" and "principles of political architecture" is central to his entire political philosophy. Thompson first chronicles Adams's conceptualization of moral and political liberty during his confrontation with American Loyalists and British imperial officers over the true nature of justice and the British Constitution, illuminating Adams's two most important pre-Revolutionary essays, "A Dissertation on the Canon and Feudal Law" and "The Letters of Novanglus." He then presents Adams's debate with French philosophers over the best form of government and provides an extended analysis of his *Defence of the Constitutions of Government* and *Discourses on Davila* to demonstrate his theory of political architecture.

From these pages emerges a new John Adams. In reexamining his political thought, Thompson reconstructs the contours and influences of Adams's mental universe, the ideas he challenged, the problems he considered central to constitution-making, and the methods of his reasoning. Skillfully blending history and political science, Thompson's work shows how the spirit of liberty animated Adams's life and reestablishes this forgotten Revolutionary as an independent and important thinker.

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