

John Adams on the abolition of slavery, 1801

Introduction

On January 24, 1801, President John Adams responded to two abolitionists who had sent him an anti-slavery pamphlet by Quaker reformer Warner Mifflin (1745–1798). In the letter, Adams expressed his views on slavery, the dangers posed by abolitionists (who at the time were mostly Quakers and unpopular religious radicals), and emancipation. Of slavery Adams writes, “my opinion against it has always been known,” noting that he has “always employed freemen both as Domisticks and Labourers, and never in my Life did I own a Slave.”

Adams, despite being opposed to slavery, did not support abolitionism except if it was done in a “gradual” way with “much caution and Circumspection.” Adams dismisses radical abolitionist measures as “produc[ing] greater violations of Justice and Humanity, than the continuance of the practice” of slavery itself. Adams also wrongly asserts that “the practice of Slavery is fast diminishing.” Rather than declining, slavery was growing in America. The 1790 census counted almost 700,000 slaves. According to the census of 1800, the year before Adams wrote this letter, that number had grown to almost 900,000.

In closing, Adams writes that he does “wish you Success in your benevolent Endeavors to relieve the distress of our fellow Creatures, and Shall always be ready to cooperate with you, as far as my means and Opportunities can reasonably be expected to extend.”

Questions for Discussion

Read the document introduction and transcript and apply your knowledge of American history to answer the following questions:

1. Identify three portions of the Adams letter in which he indicates the importance of moving cautiously when considering the abolition of slavery. Explain possible reasons Adams would have given for such concern.
2. If you had been one of the readers of this letter, how would you have responded to Adams statement that some whites in Virginia were “more oppressed, degraded and miserable than that of the Negroes”?
3. After reading this letter, which of the following would best describe Adams and his views toward slavery—committed abolitionist; apologist for slavery; sitting on the fence? Explain your answer.

John Adams on the abolition of slavery, 1801

Image

Washington January 24, 1801

Friends

I have received your Letter of the 17 of the 1. Mo. and thank you for communicating the Letter to me, of our friend James Mifflin. I have read both with pleasure, because I believe they proceed from a Sense of Duty, and a principle of Benevolence.

Although I have never sought popularity by any animated Speeches or inflammatory publications against the Slavery of the Blacks, my opinion against it has always been known, and my practice has been to conformable to my Sentiments, that I have always employed freemen both as Servants, ^{what} tithes and Labourers, and never in my Life did I own a Slave.

The Abolition of Slavery must be gradual and accomplished with much caution and Circumspection. Violent means and measures would produce greater violations of Justice and Humanity, than the continuance of the practice. Neither Mr Mifflin nor yourself, I presume would be willing to venture on Resolutions which would probably excite Insurrections among the Blacks to rise against their Masters and imbue their Lands in innocent Blood.

There are many other Evils in our Country which are growing, (whereas the practice of Slavery is fast diminishing,) and threaten to bring Punishment on our Land, more immediately, than the oppression of the Blacks. That Sacred regard to Truth in which you and I were educated, and which is certainly taught and inculcated from us high, seems to be vanishing from among us. A general Debauchery as well as Dissipation, produced by pestilential philosophical Principles of Epicurus, and infinitely more than by Shows and theatrical Entertainment. These are in my opinion more serious and threatening Evils, than even the Slavery of the Blacks, but still as that is,

John Adams to George Churchman and Jacob Lindley, January 24, 1801 (Gilder Lehrman Collection, GLC00921)

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I might even be that I have been informed, that the condition, of the common
 Sort of white People in some of the Southern States particularly Virginia, is
 more oppressed, degraded and miserable than that of the Negroes.

These Vices and these Miseries deserve the serious and
 compassionate Consideration of Friends as well as the Slave Trade and the
 degraded State of the Blacks.

I wish you Success in your benevolent Endeavours to
 relieve the distresses of our fellow creatures, and shall always be ready
 to cooperate with you, as far as my means and Opportunities
 can reasonably be expected to extend. I am with respect and

Esteem your Friend

John Adams

George Churchman of Cecil County Maryland

and

Jacob Sindley of Chester County Pennsylvania

Received by G. C. the 17th of 2nd mo. 8 days after Date.

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Transcript

John Adams to George Churchman and Jacob Lindley, January 24, 1801 (Gilder Lehrman Collection, GLC00921)

Washington January 24, 1801

Friends

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Although I have never Sought popularity by any animated Speeches or inflammatory publications against the Slavery of the Blacks, my opinion against it has always been known and my practice has been so conformable to my sentiment that I have always employed freemen both as Domisticks and Labourers, and never in my Life did I own a Slave. The Abolition of Slavery must be gradual and accomplished with much caution and Circumspection. Violent means and measures would produce greater violations of Justice and Humanity, than the continuance of the practice. Neither Mr. Mifflin nor yourselves, I presume would be willing to venture on Exertions which would probably excite Insurrections among the Blacks to rise against their Masters and imbrue their hands in innocent blood.

There are many other Evils in our Country which are growing, (whereas the practice of slavery is fast diminishing,) and threaten to bring Punishment on our Land, more immediately than the oppression of the blacks. That Sacred regard to Truth in which you and I were educated, and which is certainly taught and enjoined from on high, Seems to be vanishing from among Us. A general Relaxation of Education and Government. A general Debauchery as well as dissipation, produced by pestilential philosophical Principles of Epicurus infinitely more than by Shews and theatrical Entertainment. These are in my opinion more serious and threatening Evils, than even the slavery of the Blacks, hateful as that is.

[2] I might even add that I have been informed, that the condition, of the common Sort of White People in some of the Southern states particularly Virginia, is more oppressed, degraded and miserable than that of the Negroes.

These Vices and these Miseries deserve the serious and compassionate Consideration of Friends as well as the Slave Trade and the degraded State of the blacks.

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I wish you Success in your benevolent Endeavors to relieve the distresses of our fellow Creatures, and shall always be ready to cooperate with you, as far as my means and Opportunities can reasonably be expected to extend.

I am with respect and
Esteem your Friend
John Adams

George Churchman of Cecil County Maryland

and

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Recived by G. C. the 1st. of 2nd. mo. 8 days after Date.

[*docket*]

Date 1st. Mo. Jan. 1801

Letter from Jn^o. Adams

President of the United States

To G.C. & Jac. Lindly

A copy of that wrote to him enclosed.

[W. Mifflin] letter enclosed also