

A plan for a new government, 1775

Introduction

More than a decade before the Constitutional Convention in 1787—and months before the United States declared independence—John Adams wrote a plan for a new form of government for the American colonies.” In it Adams described the basic structure of what would become American government, including the separation of powers. “A Legislative, an Executive and a judicial Power, comprehend the whole of what is meant and understood by Government.” The ideas presented in this letter had a profound influence on the state constitutions of Virginia, New York, Massachusetts, and ultimately, the federal Constitution as the delegates created the “wisest and happiest government that human wisdom can contrive.”

On the evening of November 14, 1775, Richard Henry Lee, a Virginia delegate to the Continental Congress, had visited Adams in Philadelphia. Their meeting turned to a discussion of “what form of government is more readily and easily adopted by a colony upon a sudden emergency.” Impressed with Adams’s recommendations, Lee requested this written version of the plan, which Adams wrote the next day. Lee then distributed the contents in order to convince Virginians to split from the British Empire.

On June 7, 1776, on instruction from the Virginia Convention, Lee submitted a resolution for independence, or Lee’s Resolution, to the Continental Congress. Congress approved the resolution on July 2, 1776.

Questions for Discussion

Read the introduction, view the image of the letter, and read the transcript. Then apply your knowledge of American history as well as evidence from the document to answer the following questions:

1. Describe the background, reputation, and influence of John Adams and Richard Henry Lee as of the date of this letter, November 15, 1775.
2. What was Adams referring to when he wrote about “The Course of Events” and a “Sudden Emergency”?
3. How did Adams suggest that the development of a tyrannical government could be prevented?
4. To what extent did Adams believe that “human nature” may play a positive or negative

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role in the formation of government?

5. Identify the recommendations of Adams that were eventually incorporated into the national Constitution.

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Image

John Adams
Philadelphia Nov 15th 1775

Dear Sir

The Course of Events, naturally turns the Thoughts of Gentle-
men to the Subjects of Legislation and Jurisprudence, and it is a curious
Problem what Form of Government, is most readily & easily adopted
by a Colony, upon a Sudden Emergency. Nature and Experience
have already pointed out the Solution of this Problem, in the Choice
of Conventions and Committees of Safety. Nothing is wanting in
Addition to these to make a complete Government, but the Appoint-
ment of Magistrates for the due Administration of Justice.

Taking Nature and Experience for my guide I have made the fol-
lowing Sketch, which may be varied in any one particular
an infinite Number of ways, so as to accommodate it to the
different, Geniuses, Tempers, Principles and even Prejudices of different
People.

A Legislative, an Executive and a judicial Power, comprehend the
whole of what is meant and understood by Government. It is
by Ballancing ^{each} of these Powers against the other two, that the Effort
in humane Nature towards Tyranny, ~~may~~ ^{shall} be checked and
restrained and any degree of Freedom preserved in the Constitution.

Let a full and free Representation of the People be chosen for an
House of Commons.

Let the House choose by Ballot twelve, sixteen, twentyfour
or twenty eight Persons, either Members of the House, or from
the People at large as the Electors please, for a Council.

John Adams to Richard Henry Lee, November 15, 1775, Philadelphia, PA. (The Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC03864), p. 1.

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Let the House and Council by joint Ballot choose a Governor, annually, triennially, or Septennially as you will.

Let the Governor, Council, and House be each a distinct and independant Branch of the Legislature, and have a Negative on all Laws.

Let the St. Governor, ~~Secretaries~~, Treasurer, Comptroller, Attorney General and Solicitor General, be chosen annually, by joint Ballot of both Houses.

Let the Governor with seven Councillors be a Quorum.

Let all officers and Magistrates civil and military, be nominated and appointed by the Governor, by and with the Advice and Consent of his Council.

Let no officer be appointed but at a General Council, and let Notice be given to all the Councillors, Seven days at least before a General Council.

Let the Judges at least of the Supreme Court, be incapacitated by Law from holding any share of the legislative or executive Power, Let their Commissions be during good Behaviour, and their Salaries ascertained and established by Law.

~~Let the Governor have the Command of the Army, the Militia, &c. &c.~~

Let the Colony have a Seal and affix it to all Commissions.

In this way a single Month is sufficient without the least Convulsion or even Animosity to accomplish a total Revolution in the Government of a Colony.

If it is thought more beneficial, a Law may be made by this new Legislature ~~giving~~ ^{giving} to the People at large the Privilege of choosing their Governor,

John Adams to Richard Henry Lee, November 15, 1775, Philadelphia, PA. (The Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC03864), p. 2.

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and Councils annually, as soon as affairs get into a more
quiet Course

In Adopting a Plan, in Some Respect similar to this human
Nature would appear in its progress, destroying it
at Liberty, pulling down Tyrannies, at a single Decree
and erecting such new Fabric, as it thinks best
calculated to promote its Happiness.

As you was the last evening polite enough to ask me
for this Model, if such a Trifle will be of any
Service to you, or any gratification of Curiosity,
here you have it, from, Sir your Friend and
humble servant

John Adams

Richard Henry Lee Esq.

John Adams to Richard Henry Lee, November 15, 1775, Philadelphia, PA. (The Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC03864), p. 3.

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Transcript

John Adams to Richard Henry Lee, November 15, 1775, Philadelphia, PA. (The Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC03864)

John Adams

Philadelphia Nov^r 15th.1775

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A Legislative, an Executive and a judicial Power, comprehend the whole of what is meant and understood by Government. It is by ballancing [*struck: one*] [*inserted: each*] of these Powers against the other two, that the Effort in human nature towards Tyranny can alone be checked and restrained and any degree of Freedom preserved in the Constitution.

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Let the Colony have a Seal and affix it to all Commissions.

In this way a Single Mouth is Sufficient without the least Convulsion or even Animosity to accomplish a total Revolution in the Government of a Colony. –

If it is thought more beneficial, a Law may be made by this new Legislature [*struck*: giving] [*inserted*: leaving] to the People at large the Priviledge of choosing their Governor, [3] and Councillors annually, as Soon as affairs get into a more quiet Course

In Adopting a Plan, in Some Respects Similar to this human Nature would appear in its proper Glory asserting its own [*re*]al Dignity, pulling down Tyrannies, at a Single Exertion and erecting

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and

humble Servant

John Adams –

Richard Henry Lee Esq^r.

[address leaf]

Richard Henry Lee Esq^r

Present

[docket]

M^r. Adams

plan of

Government