

BEHIND THE BOOK

AN INTERVIEW WITH DAVID MCCULLOUGH

DAVID MCCULLOUGH SPOKE with journalist David D'Arcy about the process of writing and researching the Pulitzer Prize-winning biography *John Adams*. Excerpts from their wide-ranging interview, which aired on Public Radio stations, appear below.



every school. Nobody wanted to defend those soldiers? [The British] had cut down American citizens with their musket fire. And they came to Adams, Sam Adams and others, and said, "Will you defend these soldiers? Nobody else will." There was every indication that if he did that, his chances of ever amounting to something as a patriot or as a politician or a lawyer or anything thereafter would be greatly reduced. He would be seen as a bad guy. But he believed that you had to have equal justice before the law. If nobody else was going to defend them, then he would. And then of course he won, he got them off. It was brilliant.

Q: What is still most misunderstood, in your view, about John Adams?
A: Adams is himself a great story because of his very humble origins. He was a farmer's son. His mother was almost certainly illiterate. And he grew up under what by today's terms would be considered extreme hardship. But because he got a scholarship to go to Harvard back when Harvard was really a very small proposition compared to today—four buildings, faculty of seven—he discovered books. And as he said, he read forever. If you want an example of what education can do to transform an individual, and consequently transform society and history, Adams is a perfect one.

Q: Why did Adams take on the job of defending the British soldiers who shot at the crowd in the Boston Massacre?
A: Well, I think that's one of the most noble acts of his entire life. And it ought to be a subject that's taught in

presentation of his case. Then Adams stood up and argued for the other side. And they voted with Adams. It was never a foregone conclusion that they would vote for the Declaration of Independence. That happened on July 2. That's the day we really ought to be celebrating when we celebrate July 4. July 2 is when they voted to sign it.

Q: How extensively were you involved in the HBO production?
A: They invited me to look at the script, to advise on every detail of the film at every stage all along the way. And then they invited me to come down to the production site, which was outside of Richmond, to give a talk to the entire group. And I said, in essence, that you have the chance to reach the people of this country—and particularly the young people—with a film that will change their view about the reality of the origins of the country. And it isn't just that you're going to give them information. They're going to come away *feeling* what happened. I don't think you really can know something, really know it in your heart as well as your mind, unless you feel it. That's the power of this medium.

That's where he was at his best at calling forth to people to do what is right. When he got up in the Continental Congress in Philadelphia to make the case for passing the Declaration of Independence, he was up against one of the greatest lawyers of his day, John Dickinson, who was against signing the Declaration of Independence. It wasn't that he was against the great cause, but he was against signing that piece of paper then. And he gave a brilliant

Somebody said that God is in the details. Boy, did they care about details—everything, including the vocabulary, the lines. It's a great screenplay. I have a feeling that if John and Abigail Adams came back and saw it, they'd say, "Pretty amazing. You got us. That's it. That's the way it was."

THE GREAT QUESTION OF INDEPENDENCE

ANALYZING A LETTER FROM JOHN ADAMS TO ABIGAIL ADAMS

W O R K S H E E T

PHILADELPHIA, JULY 3RD, 1776

The hopes of reconciliation, which were fondly entertained by multitudes of honest and well-meaning though weak and mistaken people, have been gradually and at last totally extinguished. Time has been given for the whole people, naturally to consider the great question of independence and to ripen their judgments, dissipate their fears, and alter their hopes, by discussing it in news papers and pamphlets, by debating it in assemblies, conventions, committees of safety and inspection, in town and county meetings, as well as in private conversations, so that the whole people in every colony of the 13, have now adopted it as their own Act. This will cement the Union, and avoid those heats and perhaps convulsions which might have been occasioned by such a Declaration six months ago.

But the day is past. The second day of July 1776 will be the most memorable epocha in the history of America. I am apt to believe that it will be celebrated by succeeding generations: as the great anniversary festival. It ought to be commemorated as the Day of Deliverance by solemn acts of devotion to God Almighty. It ought to be solemnized with pomp and parade, with shows, games, sports, guns, bells, bonfires and illuminations from one end of this continent to the other from this time forward forever more.

You will think me transported with enthusiasm but I am not. I am well aware of the toil and blood and treasure, that it will cost us to maintain this Declaration, and support and defend these States. Yet through all the gloom I can see the rays of reviving light and glory. I can see that the end is more than worth all the means. And that posterity will triumph in that day's transaction, even although we should rue it, which I trust in God we shall not.



EPISODE SYNOPSIS

Part 5 "Unite or Die" Elected America's first Vice President.

Part 1 "Join or Die" After the 1770 Boston Massacre, Adams takes an unpopular stand by defending accused British soldiers. Adams heads to Philadelphia to join the Continental Congress—and faces an uncertain future.

Part 2 "Independence" After the 1775 Battle of Lexington and Concord, Adams argues for independence, persuading Thomas Jefferson to draft a declaration. Benjamin Franklin and Adams convince delegates, and the Continental Congress votes to declare independence on July 2, 1776.

Part 3 "Don't Tread on Me" Adams leads first to France in 1777, demanding that France increase its naval commitment to America, and then to Holland to solicit funds for the war.

Part 4 "Reunion" Learning of the British surrender to Washington, Adams returns to France and sends for Abigail, who joins him in Paris. Adams is named Ambassador to Britain, and he and Abigail move to London. Adams returns home, realizing that he and Abigail weren't meant "to sit in the shade of life."

Part 6 "Necessary War" Adams keeps the nation out of war, despite French aggression. Adams loses a bid for a second term and returns to Massachusetts.

Part 7 "Peacefield" Restless in retirement, Adams starts writing his memoirs, then endures a series of family tragedies. Adams resumes a correspondence with Jefferson that lasts the rest of his life.

For Discussion or Writing

1. At the beginning of this passage, Adams refers to "hopes of reconciliation." What is reconciliation? With whom did "multitudes of ... people" hope to achieve reconciliation? What is Adams's view of these people?
2. According to Adams, what change took place during the first six months of 1776 regarding British colonists' view of independence?
3. What prediction does Adams make about July 2, 1776? What forms of celebration does Adams say ought to be used to remember the vote to declare independence? Of these, which are still used in your community?
4. Reread the final paragraph of this letter. Why is Adams not "transported with enthusiasm"? What does he mean when he tells Abigail, "Yet through all the gloom I can see the rays of reviving light and glory"?
5. In your opinion, is Adams optimistic or pessimistic about America's future in this letter? Point to specific lines in the text to support your answer.

Permission granted to reproduce for classroom use.

For Further Exploration

- Working in pairs or small groups, conduct research to find out why July 4—and not July 2, as Adams predicted—is observed as Independence Day. What happened in the Continental Congress on July 4, 1776? What date appears on the Declaration of Independence? When was the Declaration adopted by the Continental Congress? When was it actually signed? In your opinion, would it be more logical to observe Independence Day on July 2 instead of July 4? Discuss—or stage a class debate on this question.