

Excavating an American Republic: An Analysis of John Adams' Use of the Classics in his *Defence of the Constitutions of the United States*

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Abstract

“Excavating an American Republic” uses a comparative reading of John Adams’ *Defence of the Constitutions of the United States* and the ancient writings of Polybius, Cicero, and Tacitus to explore how these classical authors greatly influenced Adams’ personal ideologies regarding politics and constitutional theory. Additionally, this article proposes that Adams’ insightful understanding and proficient application of the classics allowed him to construct a thoroughly effective rebuttal, in *Defence of the Constitutions*, against Anne Robert Jacques Turgot’s vicious anti-republic and anti-monarchical attacks against American citizens’ decisions to implement strong executive branches in many of their fledgling state republics.

Introduction: *The Punishment of a Student*

On a summer’s day, in the northern precinct of Braintree, Massachusetts, a young boy, probably no older than twelve, was feverishly digging a ditch in a meadow his father owned. This laborious task, completed under the blistering hot sun, was not one of the boy’s usual daily chores. It was a punishment the boy’s father assigned to him as penance for his foolish and inappropriate actions. One wonders what sins this boy could have committed to compel his father, a Congregationalist Deacon, to sentence his young son to such an arduous task. Surprisingly, the boy did not steal money from a neighbour, nor lie to his mother, nor commit an act of violence, nor use the Lord’s name in vain, nor break any of the Lord’s holy commandments. In fact, the only crimes young John Adams committed were to proclaim that he “did not like [the] study [of Latin]” and to ask “for some other employment,” a request Deacon John Adams willingly fulfilled for his young son.¹

¹ This story is recounted in Gilbert Chinard’s *Honest John Adams*. Chinard argues that after this traumatic event, Adams developed an appreciation for the privilege of studying Latin, a luxury that his father, a manual laborer, never enjoyed. Gilbert Chinard, *Honest John Adams* (New York: Peter Smith Publishing Inc., 1985), 11. Carl J. Richard, in *The Founders and the Classics*, agrees with Chinard’s interpretation of the impact that this event had on the young John Adams, arguing that this singular event instilled in Adams the lesson that “knowledge of the classics produced a glorious life of upward mobility” and neglect of the classics condemned an individual to a “wretched life

While John Adams perceived this as an excessively cruel punishment from his father for not wanting to zealously study his Latin grammar, Deacon Adams had his son's best interest in mind and attempted only to administer "tough love" to his son. John Adams, in recounting this anecdote, stated that after eating "the bread of [his] labor" and digging ditches for two consecutive days, he was ready to return to his study of Latin.² Although humiliated, "toil conquered pride" and on that second night the humbled John informed his father that he would like to "go back to [his] Latin-grammar."³ Adams' decision immensely pleased Deacon Adams, who knew that his son, by continuing his education in the classics, would achieve a level of social mobility that he himself never experienced.⁴

This anecdote from John Adams' childhood not only exposes the origin of Adams' appreciation for Latin and the Roman classics, but also illustrates the broader influence that the study of the Greek and Roman classics had on America's intellectual culture and social standings prior to, during, and after America's Revolutionary War. In fact, America's eighteenth century educational curriculum was so entrenched in the study of the classics that America's intellectual elite promoted an "imagined affinity between antiquity and modernity," specifically between the Roman Republic and the fledgling American states.⁵ After graduating from Harvard in 1755 and excelling in his studies of the Roman classics, Adams whole-heartedly embraced this "imagined affinity," which allowed classical literature to influence his own political and constitutional ideologies.⁶ Through his study of the classics, Adams developed a special appreciation for the Roman Republic's classical constitutionalism, which he believed "formed the noblest people, and the greatest power[,] that ever existed."⁷ Adams most obviously demonstrates his devotion to

of manual labor." Carl J. Richards, *The Founders and the Classics: Greece, Rome, and the American Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 30.

² Chinard, *Honest John Adams*, 11.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Caroline Winterer argues that a college education was crucial to social mobility in eighteenth century America, and that it was specifically necessary for anyone who wanted to enter the "pre-professional" fields, such as politics, medicine, law, or ministry. The ability to gain admission into a university heavily relied upon an individual's training in the classics, which compelled financially stable families to vigorously encourage their sons, and on rare occasions their daughters, to study classical literature and languages. With all of this in mind, it is clear that Deacon Adams, aware of the educational, political, and social climate in which his son would live, wanted to help his son achieve a better life through a strong educational foundation in the classics. Caroline Winterer, *The Culture of Classicism: Ancient Greece and Rome in American Intellectual Life, 1780-1910* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 2, 16-17. Richards, *The Founders and the Classics*, 29-31. For a thoroughly detailed analysis of how classical education permeated into all aspects of early American society, especially "civic virtue" and "gentlemanly culture," see Winterer, *The Culture of Classicism*, 10-22.

⁵ Winterer, *The Culture of Classicism*, 19.

⁶ Richards, *The Founders and the Classics*, 30-31.

⁷ John Adams, *Defence of the Constitutions of the United States of America* (New York: De Capo Press, 1971), 1:175. M.N.S. Sellers, Meyer Reinhold, and Carl J. Richard all acknowledge and briefly analyze, in their respective texts, the important influence that the classics had on shaping the political ideology of John Adams and how Adams' admiration of the Roman Republic was reflected in *Defence of the Constitutions*. M.N.S. Sellers, *American Republicanism: Roman Ideology in the United States Constitution* (Washington Square, New York: New York University Press, 1994), 33-34; Meyer Reinhold, *Classica Americana: The Greek and Roman Heritage in the United States* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1984), 100-101; Richard, *The Founders and the Classics*, 77-78.

these ancient political ideologies in the first volume of his three-volume work, *Defence of the Constitutions of the United States*.

Serving both as a history of republics from antiquity through the eighteenth century and as a thorough philosophical examination of ancient and early modern constitutionalism, *Defence of the Constitutions* represents “the finest fruit of the American Enlightenment.”⁸ In the first volume of *Defence of the Constitutions* Adams specifically relies on the governmental theories found in the writings of Polybius, Cicero, and Tacitus to form the ideological foundations for his argument that, to achieve their predestined greatness, the American states must model their republics after the Roman example and vigorously protect their mixed constitutions.⁹ A thorough, comparative reading of Adams’ *Defence of the Constitutions* and the writings of Polybius, Cicero, and Tacitus not only illustrates that Adams consistently invoked these classical authors’ authority to demonstrate the effectiveness of the Roman Republic’s constitutional government, but also illuminates how Adams used their constitutional ideologies to defend America’s state republics, specifically its “monarchical republics,” which came under attack during America’s Revolutionary War for entrusting too much power in their governments’ executive branches.¹⁰

A Contested Love Affair: The Founders’ Relationship with the Classics

Prior to the 1980s, historians who studied eighteenth century American ideologies developed the dual consensus that the Greek and Roman classics only influenced America’s founders superficially and that the founders usually misinterpreted these ancient texts. Beginning in the mid-1980s, however, a polarization developed as historians began to disagree drastically regarding how significantly the classics influenced early American political ideologies. This contested debate began with Meyer Reinhold’s *Classica Americana*. Reinhold argues, in accordance with the orthodox historiography, that the founders’ limited knowledge of antiquity, combined with their paradoxical “admiration for and hostility to[ward] the classics,” created an atmosphere of superficiality regarding their application of the ancient texts’ political theories.¹¹

⁸ Gordon S. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1783* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1972), 568.

⁹ While Polybius, Cicero, and Tacitus are not the only classical authors that Adams references within *Defence of the Constitutions*, the works of these three authors are crucial to his defense of not only American states’ republics, but also classical constitutionalism itself. For a complete list of the chapters in the first volume, see Adams, *Defence of the Constitutions*, 1:xxvii-xxxii.

¹⁰ The terms “monarchical republic,” “aristocratic republic,” and “democratic republic” refer to republics in which either a significantly greater proportion of the governing powers are allocated to one of the three respective branches or a specific branch of that republic is empowered to act as an arbiter between the other two branches, e.g. in a “monarchical republic” the monarchical or executive branch would either hold a greater proportion of the governing powers or, as Adams envisioned, would act as arbiter for disputes between the aristocratic and democratic branches. Adams, *Defence of the Constitutions*, 1:xxii; see below. Massachusetts’ state republic, whose constitution was drafted primarily by Adams, is a model example of a monarchical republic. Wood, *Creation of the American Republic*, 579.

¹¹ Reinhold, *Classica Americana*, 20.

Classica Americana rejuvenated the historical debate regarding both the depth and accuracy of the founders' comprehension of the classics. Carl J. Richard, publishing a decade after Reinhold, offered his own examination of this subject in *The Founders and the Classics*. Boldly contradicting Charles F. Mullett's and Bernard Bailyn's claim that America's founders used the classics primarily as "window dressings" for inherently Whiggish beliefs, Richard argues that the classics provided "a large portion" of the "intellectual tools" the founders used to justify their rebellion against Britain and to validate the formation of their autonomous American republic.¹² In 1994, the same year *The Founders and the Classics* was published, M.N.S. Sellers published *American Republicanism*. Sellers, expanding upon Richard's premise, not only argues that America's founders understood the classics with exceptional competence, but also proposes that their interpretations were so uniform that when one of them "used the word 'republic' they [all] thought of Rome."¹³

Both Richard's and Sellers' arguments problematized the historical consensus so severely that historians who agreed with the conventional historiography had to propose new theories, beyond naïve ignorance, to validate how and why the founders may have misinterpreted the classics. For example, in *Rome Reborn on Western Shores*, Eran Shalev argues that the founders' inherent, intellectually shallow, application of the classics arose from their longing to be included in the republican process that began in ancient Rome, which compelled the founders to blur their perception of "historical time" and to create a significantly skewed "imagined affinity" between antiquity and themselves.¹⁴

Even though the literature exploring the intellectual relationship between America's founders and the classics has grown immensely in the last thirty years, early American historians have provided, for the most part, only cursory analyses of John Adams' *Defence of the Constitutions*. For example, one of the pioneers of early American ideological history, Bernard Bailyn, barely acknowledges the existence of *Defence of the Constitutions* in *Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*. In the "Postscript" of *Ideological Origins*, which examines how the ratification of the United States Constitution was the "final and climatic expression" of the American Revolution's political and constitutional ideologies, Bailyn only superficially references *Defence of the Constitutions* in a singular footnote that provides no meaningful contribution to the analysis of Adams' seminal text.¹⁵

Jack Rakove's *Original Meanings*, a critical examination of the "original meaning" of the United States Constitution at the moment of its ratification, continues this trend of superficially

¹² Bernard Bailyn quotes Charles F. Mullett's article "Classical Influences on the American Revolution" when he states that the American founders used the classics only as "window dressings" for their political and governmental ideologies. Bernard Bailyn, *Ideological Origins of the American Revolution: Enlarged Edition* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1992), 24; Richard, *The Founders and the Classics*, 2, 7-8.

¹³ Sellers, *American Republicanism*, 7.

¹⁴ Eran Shalev, *Rome Reborn on Western Shores: Historical Imagination and the Creation of the American Republic* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009), 3-7; Richard, *The Founders and the Classics*, 30-31.

¹⁵ In this footnote, Bailyn states that Adams, in *Defence of the Constitutions*, "disparages" Montesquieu's understanding of the necessity of virtue in government. Montesquieu believed that virtue is more necessary for the success of a democracy than for a monarchy. Adams, however, considered virtue to be equally necessary in all systems of government. Bailyn, *Ideological Origins*, 321, 372.

analyzing Adams' *Defence of the Constitutions*, as it is mentioned only twice in Rakove's exceptionally detailed analysis.¹⁶ Acknowledging that the first volume of *Defence of the Constitutions* was not well received at the Constitutional Convention of 1787, Rakove states that James Madison believed it contained no new observations on constitutional theory and only gave the delegates "many things to criticize."¹⁷ Thomas Jefferson, however, also found need to critique the first volume of *Defence of the Constitutions*.¹⁸ Disagreeing with Adams, Rakove states that Jefferson did not perceive the Continental Congress as a "diplomatic assembly," but rather perceived it as "both [a] legislative and executive" entity, a correction that Adams "conceded" to be "a fair one."¹⁹

Even though Rakove does provide a slightly more detailed examination of *Defence of the Constitutions*, his analysis of Adams' text is still cursory. Gordon S. Wood's *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787*, which devotes an entire chapter to "The Relevance and Irrelevance of John Adams," provides one of the only in-depth analyses of *Defence of the Constitutions*.²⁰ In this chapter, Wood not only argues that Adams' intellectual prowess allowed him to interpret classical literature with significant accuracy, but also advocates that *Defence of the Constitutions* is the most "comprehensive description of American constitutionalism" written during the foundational years of the American republic.²¹ Finally, Wood proposes that Adams formulated his arguments in *Defence of the Constitutions* with both sincerity and honesty, arguing that "[t]here was never anything disingenuous about Adams," who always "refused to pervert the meaning of language" to advance his own beliefs.²² Through this crucial insight into Adams' ethics and morality, Wood validates the accuracy of Adams' interpretation of classical literature while illustrating the sincerity of the arguments he presents in *Defence of the Constitutions*.²³

While these are only some of the crucial observations Wood provides in his analysis of Adams' *Defence of the Constitutions*, he still does not contribute any comparative analyses between *Defence of the Constitutions* and the classical writings that influenced Adams' political

¹⁶ Jack N. Rakove, *Original Meaning: Politics and Ideas in the Making of the Constitution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), xiii-xvi.

¹⁷ James Madison to Thomas Jefferson, 6 June 1787, in *The Papers of James Madison Digital Edition: Congressional Series*, ed. J.C.A. Stagg (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2010), 10:29, <http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/founders/JSMN.html>; Rakove, *Original Meaning*, 24; Wood, *Creation of the American Republic*, 582.

¹⁸ Rakove, *Original Meaning*, 207.

¹⁹ Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, 23 February 1787, in *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson Digital Edition*, ed. Barbara B. Oberg (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014) 11:176-177, <https://jeffersonpapers.princeton.edu>; John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, 1 March 1787, in *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson Digital Edition*, 11:188-191, <https://jeffersonpapers.princeton.edu>; Rakove, *Original Meaning*, 206-207.

²⁰ Wood, *Creation of the American Republic*, 567-592.

²¹ Wood uses "American constitutionalism" in this context to refer to America's collective understanding of both the history of constitutionalism and constitutional theory in 1787, when Adams began writing *Defence of the Constitutions*. This, however, does not refer to the separation of powers within a republic between an executive, legislative, and judicial branch, which is the definition of "American constitutionalism" that, with the exception of this single quotation, this paper employs. Wood, *Creation of the American Republic*, 567-569.

²² *Ibid.*, 569.

²³ *Ibid.*

and constitutional ideologies. This disparity in Wood's analysis of *Defence of the Constitutions*, however, is representative of the egregious historiographical omission of in-depth textual comparisons between the classics and the American founders' own writings.²⁴ Early American historians, by ameliorating this historiographical void, may not only clarify the magnitude by which the classics actually influenced early America's political and constitutional ideologies, but also remove a significant ambiguity regarding early America's political and intellectual culture.

A Theoretical Fork in the Road: Classical or American Constitutionalism

John Adams divided *Defence of the Constitutions* into three chronological and thematic components of analysis: ancient republics and classical constitutionalism, medieval Italian republics, and his proposal of the ideal constitution for a republic. While he begins with a brief summary of the various active monarchical, aristocratic, and democratic republics in the 1780s, Adams' primary focus in the first volume of *Defence of the Constitutions* is exploring the distinctive attributes of classical constitutionalism.²⁵ Adams, however, also occasionally references the writings of early modern European scholars, such as Sir Thomas Smith, John Locke, John Milton, and David Hume, in the first volume of *Defence of the Constitutions*. Such references either substantiate his argument in favor of classical constitutionalism or serve as the argumentative straw man for which Adams uses classical constitutionalism to disprove.²⁶

The entire second volume and a significant portion of the third volume of *Defence of the Constitutions* is devoted to the histories of various medieval Italian republics, such as Florence,

²⁴ While Sellers' analysis of *Defence of the Constitutions* in *American Republicanism* is methodologically the closest to creating a significant examination of the writings of an American founder in relation to classical literature, he, like Wood, does not provide any in-depth, comparative textual analysis regarding how accurately Adams interpreted and reflected the ideologies presented in these classical sources. For the complete analysis, see Sellers, *American Republicanism*, 33-40.

²⁵ See above, n.10.

²⁶ In his analysis of Sir Thomas Smith's "The Commonwealth of England," Adams states that Smith argued that all governments begin with monarchy, which gives way to aristocracy, which then gives way to democracy. Adams, however, also acknowledges that this observation provides "nothing remarkable" to the examination constitutional theory. With this in mind, it becomes clear that Adams only referenced Smith's arguments to provide further support for his reliance on Polybius' theory of the decay of the single systems of government, on which Smith's aforementioned theory is based. While Adams uses Smith to support his defense of classical constitutionalism, he uses the writings of John Locke, John Milton, and David Hume as a straw man, against which he illustrates the importance of relying on classical constitutionalism. After providing a brief summary of each of the three philosophers' "ideal" system of government, all of which are versions of extreme aristocracy, Adams argues that none of them fully understood the practical application of constitutionalism. Adams then argues that the best way to prevent corruption in a republic is not to "abolish [its] kings or lords," but rather to strengthen its "house of commons." According to Adams, a stronger democratic branch would have allowed "the people [to] take care of the balanc[ing]" of government and may have prevented England's devolution into tyranny. Through this masterful use of Locke, Milton, and Hume's writings, Adams simultaneously appeases those Americans in favor of granting greater constitutional powers to the common people while demonstrating how that goal can be achieved without weakening the monarchical branch of America's state republics. Adams, *Defence of the Constitutions*, 1:207-208, 365-370, 371.

Bologna, and Montepulciano.²⁷ After concluding his historical examination of these medieval republics, *Defence of the Constitutions* thematically shifts to Adams' analysis of "The Right Constitution of a Commonwealth," which serves as the text's analytical climax regarding constitutional theory.²⁸ Finally, Adams concludes *Defence of the Constitutions of the United States* with both a "Postscript," in which he critically reviews the newly ratified United States Constitution, and a copy of the United States Constitution, which represents the culmination of Americans' comprehension of constitutionalism at the birth of their new republic.²⁹

Although *Defence of the Constitutions of the United States* does conclude with the United States Constitution, Adams chooses to support classical constitutionalism over "American constitutionalism," the latter of which only became an accepted ideology after the ratification of the United States Constitution. American constitutionalism, at its core, promotes the separation of powers within a republic between an executive, a legislature, and a judiciary.³⁰ Classical constitutionalism, however, argues that a republic should divide power between a monarchical, aristocratic, and democratic branch, which would ensure that "a governor, a senate, and a house of representative" retained not only an equal voice in government, but also the ability to "restrain the irrationalities of men" and to prevent any tyrannical actions from the other two branches.³¹

The ideological difference between classical and American constitutionalism hinges on disagreements concerning "the archaic image of society" and the necessity of a judicial branch.³² Classical republics, through their division of power, relied on the ideological certainty that nobility always exist within a society. Wood argues in *Creation of the American Republic* that Adams embraced this pragmatic view of humanity and accepted the pessimistic truth that America could never be "truly egalitarian" and, therefore, could survive only by replicating its inherent "oligarchical nature" within its state republics.³³ A significant proportion of America's educated elite, however, was heavily influenced by the Enlightenment's optimistic philosophies regarding humanity's capability for civic virtue. These optimists disagreed with Adams, not only arguing that inherent societal division was too archaic a belief for the enlightened American republic, but also proposing that the supposed "aristocracy" of American society could be

²⁷ For Adams' analysis of Florence, see Adams, *Defence of the Constitutions*, 2:1ff.; for his analysis of Bologna, see Adams, *Defence of the Constitutions*, 2:388ff.; for his analysis of Montepulciano, see Adams, *Defence of the Constitutions*, 3:202ff.

²⁸ For Adams' examination of "The Right Constitution of a Commonwealth," see Adams, *Defence of the Constitutions*, 3:209ff.

²⁹ For Adams' "Postscript" regarding the ratification of the United States Constitution, written in the form of a letter on December 26, 1787 in Grosvenor Square, London, England, see Adams, *Defence of the Constitutions*, 3:502-506. For the United States Constitutions, see Adams, *Defence of the Constitutions*, 3:507-528.

³⁰ Rakove, *Original Meaning*, 245-246. Wood specifically notes that the judiciary branch "benefited most from this new, enlarged definition of separation of powers" and that, in the years following the ratification of the United States Constitution, the judicial branch would become entrenched as one of the "three capital powers of Government that is so characteristic of later American constitutionalism." Wood, *Creation of the American Republic*, 453-454.

³¹ Adams, *Defence of the Constitutions*, 1:xix, 169-170; Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic*, 575; 578-579.

³² Rakove, *Original Meaning*, 246.

³³ Wood, *Creation of the American Republic*, 569, 577, 586.

combined with the nation's "common people" into a singular legislature, which would share governmental powers and promote, without bias, the welfare of all of the republic's citizens.³⁴

While classical constitutionalism and American constitutionalism clearly diverge regarding the inherent nature of nobility, perhaps the clearest ideological division between these two schools concerns the necessity of a judicial branch within the republic. The framers of the United States Constitution, to prevent the distortion of America's national laws, created an independent federal judiciary with its own unique powers.³⁵ In theory, this formation of a new judicial branch would allow judges the power to check the legislative or executive branches without fear of political repercussions, such as financial punishment or impeachment.³⁶

Classical constitutionalism, however, promotes the division of judicial powers among the three existing branches of government: the monarchical branch would manage the trials and punishments of soldiers and those serving under the executive's command; the aristocratic branch would try all crimes committed within or against the state, such as "treason, conspiracy, ... and assassination"; and the democratic branch would be "empowered" to conduct trials "in which the offense is punishable by a fine" or in which the defendant is facing "capital charges."³⁷ Theoretically, this tripartite separation of judicial powers would ensure that the judiciary's integrity could not be jeopardized if one branch succumbed to political corruption.

The Massachusetts Constitution and Mr. Turgot: The First Shots of an Ideological War

While it is clear how classical constitutionalism appealed to Adams' pessimistic tendencies, comprehending why he relied on classical ideologies to establish the theoretical foundations in *Defence of the Constitutions* hinges upon first understanding the political atmosphere that motivated Adams to write this text. The first volume of Adams' *Defence of the Constitutions* was published on January 1, 1787, less than four years after America gained officially recognized independence from Great Britain.³⁸ The memories of the oppressive and tyrannical rule of King George III and the wounds from fighting a bloody war to secure America's freedom remained raw for many of the newly independent Americans. In the "Preface" of *Defence of the Constitutions*, Adams boldly proclaims that "the institutions now made in America," referring to the states' republics, would "never wear wholly out for thousands of years" so long as they "begin right" and avoid political subversion and corruption.³⁹ This self-righteous claim reflects Adams' genuine belief that America's individual states, by embracing

³⁴ Wood, *Creation of the American Republic*, 569; Rakove, *Original Meaning*, 245-46.

³⁵ Wood argues that the ideological movement within America to establish an independent judiciary began as early as America's Revolutionary War. Wood, *Creation of the American Republic*, 161.

³⁶ Wood, *Creation of the American Republic*, 161, 454. For a brief examination of how the tenure of judges in eighteenth century England influenced the ideological modification of the tenure of judges, and the judiciary itself, in America after its Revolutionary War, see Rakove, *Original Meaning*, 297-302.

³⁷ Polybius, *The Rise of the Roman Empire*, trans. Ian Scott-Kilvert (New York: Penguin Books, 1979), 6.12-6.14.

³⁸ Adams, *Defence of the Constitutions*, 1:xxvi.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 1:xxv.

republics governed by classical constitutionalism, could secure the rights of their citizens while preventing their government from succumbing to the ever-festering threat of tyranny.

Although Adams did not compose and publish the first volume of *Defence of the Constitutions* until 1787, one can trace his application of classical constitutionalism to his participation in drafting the Constitution of Massachusetts of 1780.⁴⁰ The Constitution of Massachusetts created a bicameral legislature that contained a “House of Representatives,” intended as “the Representatives of the Persons” and a “Senate [acting as] the property of the Commonwealth.”⁴¹ Adams, by encapsulating the aristocratic and democratic aspects of a classical republic into the Massachusetts Legislature, while ensuring both groups maintained individual political powers, adhered to the classical “tripartite balance” of government by creating an entity which had the political power to check the monarchical powers of Massachusetts’ state governor.⁴² By 1787, however, Adams was distraught to see that state governors and senators were “somehow as representative of the people as the House of Representatives,” thus transforming state republics into representative democracies.⁴³ Fear that the balance of America’s state republics, specifically Massachusetts, may be lost to the chaos of democracy was an essential factor in Adams’ decision to write *Defence of the Constitutions*.

If, however, Adams had simply meant either to exalt the genius of Massachusetts for forming a properly balanced republic or to express his fearfulness that non-classical republics would decay into chaotic democracies, he would not have called his text a “*Defence*.” The central issue that motivated Adams to write *Defence of the Constitutions* was a letter written by Anne Robert Jacques Turgot, Baron de Laune, on March 22, 1778. In this letter to Dr. Richard Price, an English minister, Turgot laments that England succumbed to tyranny and never learned the “common truth that one nation has never any right to govern another nation,” implying that England’s greatest failure was its attempt to rule America.⁴⁴ Although Turgot, without a doubt, supported America’s rebellion, he was critical of America’s political foundations, especially “the constitutions that [were] drawn out by the different American states.”⁴⁵ Turgot was unhappy that states, such as Pennsylvania, had created mixed constitutions that replicated England’s governmental divisions by placing extensive powers in their executive branches. The most upsetting aspect for Turgot, however, was Americans’ foolish belief that mixed constitutions

⁴⁰ Wood, *Creation of the American Republic*, 568.

⁴¹ “An Address of the Convention” in *Journal of the Convention for Framing a Constitution of Government for the State of Massachusetts Bay: From the Commencement of their First Session, September 1, 1779, to the close of their last session, June 16, 1780, Digital Edition* (Boston: Button and Wentworth, Printers to the State, 1832), 218-219, <https://archive.org/details/conventjournalof00massrich>; Wood, *Creation of the American Republic*, 218.

⁴² Wood, *Creation of the American Republic*, 576-577. While Massachusetts established a judicial branch within its republic, the judiciary could not check the political powers of the executive or either houses of the legislature and, therefore, the Constitution of Massachusetts still adhered to the principles of classical constitutionalism; see “Constitution of Massachusetts,” National Humanities Institute, <http://www.nhinet.org/ccs/docs/ma-1780.htm>.

⁴³ Wood, *Creation of the American Republic*, 586.

⁴⁴ To Anne Robert Jacques Turgot, in *The Turgot Collection: Writings, Speeches, and Letters of Anne Robert Jacques Turgot, Baron de Laune*, ed. David Gordon (Auburn, Alabama: Ludwig von Mises Institute, 2011), 499.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 500. Turgot could not have opposed the strong monarchical powers of the Constitution of Massachusetts since, at the time of writing his letter, the Constitution of Massachusetts had not been drafted or ratified.

would function “in republics founded on the equality of all the citizens.”⁴⁶ Turgot, through this claim, implies that the framers of America’s state constitutions, by giving any political power to their executives, betrayed the equality of the Declaration of Independence and “created real [dangers]” of tyranny in the American states.⁴⁷

Turgot’s critiques must have profoundly offended Adams, especially if he first heard them while drafting the Constitution of Massachusetts. Adams, in the first chapter of *Defence of the Constitutions*, titled “Letter I,” quotes at length Turgot’s letter to Dr. Price, using Turgot’s criticism as the foundation for the anti-republic argument he attempts to disprove.⁴⁸ In “Letter II,” Adams discredits Turgot’s claims by arguing that “Mr. Turgot is offended” not because America chose to establish republics, but because he perceives that “the customs of England are imitated in most of the new constitutions in America,” which Adams argues to be incorrect by illustrating the constitutional parallels between America’s state republics and the Roman Republic.⁴⁹ Furthermore, Adams states that Turgot must be arguing for the American people to choose “an assembly of representatives... vested with all the powers of government.”⁵⁰ Perceiving Turgot’s proposal for Americans to embrace democracy in their fledgling state governments as foolish, Adams states that he wrote *Defence of the Constitutions* to expose “this idea of Mr. Turgot in all lights” and to collect “a variety of authorities against it.”⁵¹ Among those authorities, it is the authors of antiquity who Adams first summons for testimony.

Invoking Historical Power: Adams and the Authority of the Classics

The insights presented in *Defence of the Constitutions* display Adams as a proficient scholar of the classics who understood the intellectual authority that classical ideologies held in early American culture. Adams used this authority to validate his belief that classical republics were the best form of government. Through an extensive and precise reliance upon the arguments of Polybius, Cicero, and Tacitus, either by paraphrasing their works in English or by including quotations from their works in the original Latin, Adams successfully invoked the political and emotional persuasiveness of these ancient texts in *Defence of the Constitutions*.

Adams consciously chose to paraphrase, in English, all sections of Polybius’ *The Histories* within *Defence of the Constitutions*, a choice that most likely originated from Adams’ linguistic preference for Latin over Greek and the practicality of addressing his targeted audience.⁵² Most notably, Polybius is one of the only authors that Adams references within *Defence of the Constitutions* who wrote in Greek, which was not Adams’ language of expertise.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ *The Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States* (New York: Bantam Dell, 2008); To Turgot, 500-501.

⁴⁸ Adams, *Defence of the Constitutions*, 1:3-4.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 1:5.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 1:7.

⁵¹ Ibid., 1:8.

⁵² The most direct translation of the title of Polybius’ text from Greek to English is “The Histories,” yet it is often referred to as “The Rise of the Roman Empire,” which is the title that Ian Scott-Kilvert chose for his translation.

Adams openly admitted on multiple occasions that he preferred reading and translating Latin, often bemoaning the extensive Greek passages that Thomas Jefferson included in their correspondences.⁵³ In fact, many, if not all, of the quotations that Adams includes from Polybius' *The Histories* are from Edward Spelman's professional, English translation of the text, further illustrating Adams' decision to avoid reading or translating Greek while composing *Defence of the Constitutions*.⁵⁴

While Adams' lackluster enthusiasm for Greek may have influenced his decision not to quote *The Histories* in its original language, this decision may have also emerged from a pragmatic motivation to ensure *Defence of the Constitutions* reached the largest audience possible. Richard argues in *Founders and the Classics* that Thomas Jefferson, whose favorite language was Greek, frequently complained that the "[American] educational system favored Latin over Greek."⁵⁵ With this in mind, it may have been fairly common for even the most educated of eighteenth century Americans, like Adams, to find reading Greek difficult. Adams' choice, therefore, to include an English translation of Polybius' constitutional theories in *Defence of the Constitutions* was a rhetorical necessity, one which ensured all English-literate readers could understand the foundational theories of Adams' argument.

While there are no direct Greek quotations from *The Histories* in *Defence of the Constitutions*, Adams does include quotations from Cicero's and Tacitus' texts in their original Latin. Adams may have chosen to include these Latin quotes not only because he believed that his contemporaries, like himself, were better versed in Latin, but also because he hoped that, by including the original words of Cicero or Tacitus, he could better validate his argument to his audience than if he had translated their ideas into English.⁵⁶ For example, Adams made a meticulous and conscious decision to include quotes from Cicero's *De Republica* in Latin, such as: "[s]tatuo esse optime constitutam republicam, quae ex tribus generibus illis, regali, optimo, et populari, modice consusa."⁵⁷ Quoting Cicero's Latin serves a twofold purpose. First, it allows

⁵³ Richard, *The Founders and the Classics*, 27.

⁵⁴ Adams, *Defence of the Constitutions*, 1:169. Adams cites Edward Spelman's *The Roman Antiquities of Dionysius Hallicarnassensis* as the source from which he obtains the English translation of Book VI of Polybius' *The Histories*. According to Adams, at the end of *The Roman Antiquities*, specifically beginning with page 391 of the copy he used, Spelman included a translation of part, if not all, of Book VI of Polybius' *The Histories*. For a modern printing of this text see Edward Spelman, *The Roman Antiquities of Dionysius Hallicarnassensis translated into English, with notes and dissertations, by Edward Spelman, Esq.* (Gale ECCO Publishing, 2012), 391.

⁵⁵ Richard, *The Founders and the Classics*, 28.

⁵⁶ In order to understand the flexibility of reading and translating Latin, one must first comprehend the natural vagueness present in translating Latin into English. For example, the verb *agere*, depending on the context of a sentence, can mean any of the following: "to do," "to go," "to act," "to drive," "to urge," "to conduct," "to spend (time)," or "to thank." Therefore, the act of translating Latin into English allows a certain level of creative interpretation to occur, which will cause minor differences from one translation to the next. Frederic M. Wheelock, *Wheelock's Latin*, 7th ed, revised by Richard A. LaFleur (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2011), 518.

⁵⁷ Cicero, *On the Commonwealth and On the Laws*, ed. James E. G. Zetzel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). For a summary of Cicero's life and of *De Republica*, see Cicero, *On the Commonwealth*, vii-viii, xvi; for a complete chronology of Cicero's life, see Cicero, *On the Commonwealth*, xxvii-xxviii. Additionally, please note that this paper uses the Zetzel translation of *De Republica* to cross-reference Adams' interpretations regarding Cicero's text. This is important to note because, as a re-edited version, the numbering system of Zetzel's translation does not always match the numbering of previous editions. Adams, *Defence of the Constitutions*, 1:xix. Cicero, *De*

Adams' Latin literate readers to compare Cicero's ideas with Adams' interpretation and, therefore, establish credibility for *Defence of the Constitutions*. This inclusion of the original Latin, however, also plays a much deeper, symbolic role within the rhetoric of Adams' argument. By including this single sentence in its original Latin, Adams makes a logically invalid yet emotionally persuasive appeal to authority. Adams subtly implies to his readers that the words of Cicero are so important that, even though he is fully capable of including translations of them for his readers, just as he did with Polybius, he is choosing not to tarnish their greatness through imperfect translations, ensuring that his readers understand the ideological significance of Cicero's enlightened constitutional theories.

A Greek Foundation: Adams' Support of Polybius' Mixed Constitution

With this basic understanding of the authority that the classics brought to *Defence of the Constitutions*, one can examine, beginning with Polybius' *The Histories*, how the classics influenced Adams' constitutional ideas. Polybius, one of the most important historians of antiquity, wrote *The Histories* during the height of the Roman Republic, in approximately 167 BCE.⁵⁸ While Adams relies on Polybius' theories of government to validate his arguments, he does not ignore the historian's obvious pro-Roman and pro-republic biases. Prior to beginning his analysis of Polybius' theories on classical constitutionalism, Adams acknowledges that Polybius wrote after "the second [P]unic war...[when] the Romans were in their greatest vigor," and reminds his readers that Polybius may have skewed his history, intentionally or accidentally, to reflect the supposed glory of Rome in the second century BCE.⁵⁹

While Adams acknowledges these potential biases within *The Histories*, he also agrees with some of them and, by elaborating on Polybius' rationale for why the Roman Republic had reached the zenith of political advancement in the second century BCE, uses these biases to further his own arguments regarding America's state republics in *Defence of the Constitutions*. The Roman Republic's greatness after the Second Punic War and during the Third Punic War, Polybius argued, arose from its ability to ensure that the Senate, which embodied the most educated men of Rome, maintained its appropriate political powers, specifically preserving its "decisive voice" regarding decisions of public policy."⁶⁰ Polybius, however, juxtaposes the Roman Republic's stability with the political decay of Carthage, whom Rome brutally conquered in the Third Punic War. Carthage was defeated, according to Polybius, because the political balance of Carthage's constitution declined and "the influence of the people" became

Republica, 1.69. "I establish that the best commonwealth constitution is that, which from the three general forms, pertaining to a king, pertaining to the best men, and pertaining to the people, which is moderately mixed." Please note all translations of the works of Polybius, Cicero, and Tacitus that appear in English in the body of this paper are from the professional translations cited in this paper's footnotes. All translations of the Latin phrases included in *Defence of the Constitutions*, which appear in the footnotes of this paper, are my own translations.

⁵⁸ Polybius, *The Rise of the Roman Empire*, 13-17.

⁵⁹ Adams, *Defence of the Constitutions*, 1:101.

⁶⁰ Polybius, *The Rise of the Roman Empire*, 6.51.

“predominant” in all matters of government, including public policy.⁶¹ Adams, through his masterful use of rhetoric, acknowledges Polybius’ pro-republican biases while using those same biases to illustrate the unavoidable political dangers that Americans would face if they followed Turgot’s advice and bestowed all political power to the common people.

After establishing and exploiting Polybius’ biases, Adams begins his examination of Book VI of *The Histories*, which provides one of the most important examinations of the practical workings of Rome’s republic. Polybius begins this analysis by first explaining to his readers the basic forms of single system governments that occur in human society. According to Polybius there are three basic archetypes of government, “one-man rule, minority rule, and mob rule,” and each of these archetypes possesses a positive and negative manifestation.⁶² From this singular premise, Polybius develops his theory of the decay of the single systems of government, which states that every beneficent kingship will corrupt into tyranny, every altruistic aristocracy will succumb to oligarchy, and every compassionate democracy will devolve into mob rule.⁶³ Polybius, by explaining these transitions as the “cycle of governments,” exposes the inherent flaw of placing solitary political power into a single branch of government, since power can and will corrupt any man or group of men, regardless of social status.

Polybius’ writings regarding single systems of government were essential in Adams’ development of his own political ideology. In *Defence of the Constitutions*, Adams constantly invokes Polybius’ theories to illustrate the corruptibility of the single systems of government.⁶⁴ It is fascinating, however, that a man as well educated and eloquent as John Adams decided to paraphrase Polybius’ ideas with almost no additional observations. For example, Adams begins his analysis of the single systems of government by explaining that governments arise “from the weakness of men” and that a kingship is born from a fledgling society choosing, as their leader, one who “excels in strength and courage.”⁶⁵ Polybius, when explaining the birth of government in human society, states that “[humanity’s] natural weakness” compels a society to appoint an individual “who excels in physical strength and courage” to “rule over the rest.”⁶⁶ This sparse commentary on Polybius’ theories of government continues in Adams’ analysis of Lycurgus’

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid., 6.4. Polybius argues that one-man rule either manifests as a kingship or tyranny; minority rule as either aristocracy or oligarchy; mob rule as democracy or a lawless, chaotic mob.

⁶³ Ibid., 6.5-9. Polybius goes into great detail explaining the cyclical nature of single system governments, of which this paper, due to its limitations, can only provide a brief summary. Polybius states that when men are faced with a situation they cannot overcome, they choose a man who “excels in physical strength and courage” and thus elect their first king. As this man’s power becomes hereditary, however, his descendants become corrupt and the once benign kinship devolves into tyranny because the first king’s descendants “indulge their appetites [for power].” In order to stop this tyranny, the “noblest, the most high-minded” men overthrow the tyrant and, with the blessing of the people, install an aristocracy. The aristocrats’ power also becomes hereditary and thus corruption arises yet again, allowing an oligarchy to be established. Now the common people themselves will overthrow this corrupted government and place the power in their own, democratic hands. Yet, as time passes, men become “so accustomed to equality” that they no longer value it and allow the government to be transformed into a mob of greed and violence. When this occurs, in desperation, society will once again find a “master and a despot” to restore order with a kingship, and thus the entire cycle begins again.

⁶⁴ Adams, *Defence of the Constitutions*, 1:178-181.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 1:178.

⁶⁶ Polybius, *The Rise of the Roman Empire*, 6.5.

creation of Sparta's mixed constitution in the eighth century BCE. According to Adams, Lycurgus established a Spartan government that "united in one all the advantages of the best governments," ensuring that "no one part might outweigh the rest."⁶⁷ Adams, yet again, strictly echoes Polybius. Lycurgus, according to Polybius, "combined in [the Spartan constitution] all the virtues and distinctive features of the best governments" to ensure that "no one of [each type] inclines or sinks unduly to either side" and disrupts the republic's delicate balance of power.⁶⁸

Through this reliance on the exact phrases used in *The Histories*, it becomes clear that Adams completely agreed with Polybius regarding the decay of the single systems of government and believed that Polybius explained these theories so precisely that no additional commentary was necessary. Furthermore, this agreement between Polybius' and Adams' writings remains consistent throughout Adams' exploration of how to create a properly balanced mixed constitution. Polybius, after praising Lycurgus for creating the basic template for all mixed constitutions, explains that the Roman Republic created a mixed constitution that distributed specific powers to the consuls, the senate, and the people, therefore creating respective representative branches of power within its republic for monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy.⁶⁹ According to Polybius, if these three branches of government perform their duties correctly, they will create "a union which is strong enough to withstand all emergencies" while remaining "in equilibrium[,] since any aggressive impulse" by one branch of the republic "is checked" by the other branches.⁷⁰ Adams fully supports Polybius' analysis of Rome's mixed constitution and, yet again, decides to paraphrase much of Polybius' original text.⁷¹ In fact, Adams does not stop with simply repeating the words of the ancient historian, but goes on to support Polybius' claim that "it is impossible to invent a more perfect system" than the

⁶⁷ Adams, *Defence of the Constitutions*, 1:181.

⁶⁸ Polybius, *The Rise of the Roman Empire*, 6.10.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 6.11. Polybius goes on to explain the powers of each of these three branches of government, of which several unique characteristics are exhibited. The consuls, of which there are two at any given time, have the power to "lead out the legions" of Rome, to "exercise supreme authority over public affairs," "to inflict punishment when on active service upon anyone under their command," and, "for preparations of war" they have "power [that] is almost absolute." The Senate "control[s] the treasury and regulates the flow of all revenue and expenditure," investigates "any crimes in Italy which require a public investigation," and dispatches "embassies or commissions to countries outside of Italy." The people "are empowered to try... cases in which the offense is punishable by a fine," and they "are the only court which may try on capital charges" furthermore, the people have the ability to "bestow offices on those who deserve them," and they have the "power to approve or reject laws... [as well as] decide on questions of peace or war." *Ibid.*, 6.12-14.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.18.

⁷¹ Adams, *Defence of the Constitutions*, 1:171-175. Within these pages Adams explains the roles of the consuls, the senate, and the people of the Roman Republic, clearly relying on *The Histories* as his authoritative source. Adams explains that the consuls "before they take the field [of war], have the administration of public affairs," have "almost an absolute power in everything that relates... to the preparations of war," and have "a power, when in the field, of punishing any who serve under them." The senate commands "the public money," "takes cognizance of all crimes committed in Italy," and "sends embassies out of Italy." The people, of which "there is still a most considerable share in the government," "take cognizance of those causes where the fine is considerable," hold singular authority "in capital cases," "have the power of conferring the magistracy upon those they think worthy of it," and "have the power of rejecting and confirming laws, and determine [issues] concerning peace and war."

republic.⁷² Adams explains that “[t]he Roman constitution formed the noblest people, and the greatest power, that ever existed” and emphasizes to his readers that “[Polybius’] opinion,” which argues that a republic is the best system of government, “is very different from that of Mr. Turgot,” who foolishly believes that democracy is the most advanced system of government.⁷³

Although one can clearly see how influential *The Histories* were on the arguments in *Defence of the Constitutions*, it would be inaccurate to claim that Adams agreed with Polybius on every matter of constitutional theory. In fact, there are two critical areas where Adams drastically departed from Polybius’ theories. First, Adams rejected Polybius’ belief that the first king or aristocrats of any government were men “of goodness and of justice.”⁷⁴ Adams, fueled by his lingering animosity towards King George III and the English Parliament, claims that “the king, the aristocracy, and the people” once “secure in the possession of their power, would begin to abuse it” and, in doing so, simultaneously exposes his pessimism regarding human nature and illustrates his belief in the necessity of inflexible political checks within a republic.⁷⁵

The second area in which Adams disagrees with Polybius is regarding the legacy of the Roman Republic. While Adams previously agreed that the Roman Republic’s constitution created the “greatest power” that “ever existed,” he does not agree that the Roman Republic will remain the greatest republic in human history.⁷⁶ Adams brazenly declares that American citizens should “see cause to differ widely from the judgment of Polybius” and should agree that “the constitutions of several of the United States,” because of their decisions to grant their executives the “power to interpose and decide between the people and the Senate,” were improvements “upon the Roman, Spartan, and the English commonwealths.”⁷⁷ Adams, through *Defence of the Constitutions*, argues that America’s states, by creating monarchical republics, perfected the noblest system of government, completing a process that began over two millennia ago.

The Twilight of the Republic: Adams and Cicero’s De Republica

While Polybius’ *The Histories* provided the foundational theories for John Adams’ understanding of the single systems of government and the ideal republic’s mixed constitution, the classical author who held the greatest ideological sway over Adams was the great Roman orator and statesman Marcus Tullius Cicero. Not only one of the Roman Republic’s most prolific writers, Cicero was also one of the few Romans who both lived during and wrote about the final years of the Roman Republic. Many historians have argued that the works and life of Cicero significantly influenced both the political ideologies and personal behavior of John Adams. For example, James M. Farrell argues that “Cicero had been [Adams’] foremost model of public

⁷² Ibid., 1:175. Polybius, in his own analysis of the Roman Republic’s constitution, states, “It is impossible to find a better form of constitution than [the Roman Republic’s constitution].” Polybius, *The Rise of the Roman Empire*, 6.18.

⁷³ Adams, *Defence of the Constitutions*, 1:175.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 1:181-182; Polybius, *The Rise of the Roman Empire*, 6.7.

⁷⁵ Adams, *Defence of the Constitutions*, 1:182.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 1:175.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 1:176.

service, republican virtue, and forensic eloquence” and that Adams saw himself as being “‘persecuted and tormented’ for his ‘most virtuous and glorious actions’” just as his Roman idol.⁷⁸ The “Preface” of *Defence of the Constitutions* further supports this claim since Adams, when introducing Cicero to his readers, states that “all the ages of the world have not produced a greater statesman and philosopher” than Cicero.⁷⁹

The self-identification and kinship that Adams felt with Cicero is crucial to understanding why he connected so deeply with the ideas of his Roman idol. Cicero’s *De Republica*, the last text to analyze the Roman Republic that was authored by a man living during the Republic, was a central influence on the constitutional ideologies in *Defence of the Constitutions*.⁸⁰ Cicero authored *De Republica*, which translates to “On the Commonwealth,” between 54-51 BCE, only several years prior to the great Roman Civil War between Gaius Julius Caesar and Gnaeus Magnus Pompey — a civil war that slayed the Roman Republic and ushered in the new Roman Empire. Cicero, a man of great insight, was aware of the tense political climate leading up to this civil war and wrote *De Republica* as a last appeal to Rome’s citizens to restore the greatness of their republic. It is unsurprising that Adams, who viewed the American state republics at the turning point of either success or failure, looked to the writings of Cicero for solace and advice.

Using the legendary military leader Scipio Aemilianus Africanus as his narrator, Cicero begins his exploration of Rome’s republic.⁸¹ First and foremost, Cicero defines a republic as “the concern[s] of a people,” with the people being “an assemblage of some size associated with one another through agreement on law and community of interest.”⁸² While it is unsurprising that Adams uses Cicero’s definition of a republic in *Defence of the Constitutions*, it is important to

⁷⁸ James M. Farrell, “John Adams Autobiography: The Ciceronian Paradigm and the Quest for Fame,” *The New England Quarterly* 62 (1989): 506, 523. The event that Adams refers to as being Cicero’s “most virtuous and glorious action” is Cicero’s resolution of the “Catiline Conspiracy.” This was a conspiracy that Cicero uncovered while consul of Rome in 63 BCE. Cicero determined that a Roman named Catiline, along with several other men, was planning to overthrow the Republic. Cicero, as consul, placed Rome under a state of martial law and, after capturing the supposed conspirators, executed them without a trial. This execution of Roman citizens without a trial by their peers, however, did not sit well with many of Rome’s senators and Cicero was exiled from Rome from 58 to 57 BCE for overstepping the power of the consul. Although unjust, Cicero complied with his exile without complaint, thus establishing for John Adams the selfless martyr archetype which he believed he shared with Cicero. For a full, detailed account of the Catiline Conspiracy and Cicero’s actions during these events, see Sallust, *The Jugurthine War/The Conspiracy of Catiline*, trans. S. A. Handford (New York: Penguin Books, 1963), 151ff.

⁷⁹ Adams, *Defence of the Constitutions*, 1:xxi. Winterer explains that “[a]bove all other ancient orators, Revolutionary Americans idealized Cicero...as the ideal citizen whose incorruptible morals protected the Roman republic from tyranny,” illustrating that while Adams may have idolized Cicero more devoutly than the average Revolutionary American, his adoration was not uncommon. Winterer, *The Culture of Classicism*, 25.

⁸⁰ One of the most fascinating aspects of Adams’ reliance on and use of *De Republica* in *Defence of the Constitutions* is that neither he, nor the modern Western World, has a complete copy of Cicero’s manuscript. Adams laments this tragic loss in the “Preface” of *Defence of the Constitutions*, stating that “the loss” of Cicero’s “book upon republics is much to be regretted.” Adams implies that if it had survived in its entirety it may have surpassed Book VI of Polybius’s *The Histories* as the supreme authority regarding republics and classical constitutionalism. Adams, *Defence of the Constitutions*, 1:xix-xx.

⁸¹ Scipio Aemilianus Africanus led Rome to its final victory over Carthage in the Third Punic War. It is no coincidence, however, that Cicero uses Scipio as his narrator for *De Republica*, since Scipio provided Polybius with lodgings during his detention by the Roman Republic during the Third Punic War, which is also when Polybius composed most of *The Histories*. Polybius, *Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 12.

⁸² Cicero, *On the Commonwealth*, 1.39.

note that Adams quotes the original Latin: “Respublica res est populi.”⁸³ In fact, Adams so fully agrees with Cicero’s simplistic and pure definition of a republic that, just as with the theories he paraphrased from *The Histories*, he provides no additional textual commentary.

Cicero’s *De Republica*, like *Defence of the Constitutions*, also relies greatly on the constitutional analyses in Polybius’ *The Histories*. For example, near the end of the first book of *De Republica*, Cicero states that monarchy, which he previously argued to be the best of the three single systems of government, “is surpassed by a government which is balanced and compounded from the three primary forms” of a republic.⁸⁴ Cicero, echoing the words of Polybius, states that through this combined system of government, this republic would obtain “a certain degree of equality” and prevent “the possibility of sudden collapse.”⁸⁵ Adams yet again quotes Cicero’s original Latin: “Statuo esse optime constitutam republicam, quae ex tribus generibus illis, regali, optimo, et populari, modice consusa.”⁸⁶ After this quotation, Adams provides only a brief analysis, agreeing that Cicero’s republic has “superiority... to all other forms.”⁸⁷ By building upon Polybius’ views towards republics and classical constitutionalism, Cicero indirectly validated Polybius’ credibility, providing an explanation for why Adams, who preferred Roman classics, continually referenced *The Histories* in *Defence of the Constitutions*.

Even though Adams relied upon Cicero’s *De Republica* to provide credibility to his pro-republic arguments in *Defence of the Constitutions*, Adams disagreed with Cicero’s constitutional theories in several significant areas. Even though both Cicero and Adams accepted the cyclical nature of the single systems of government, Adams disagreed with Cicero’s view towards the role of revolutions within a republic. Cicero states that “there are remarkable revolutions” and “cycles of change and alterations in [republics]” that cannot be avoided.⁸⁸ Since these revolutions cannot be avoided, Cicero believes that the only way to ensure the longevity of the republic is for the “wise [men],” those in charge of the commonwealth, to “keep [these changes] under [their] control while governing.”⁸⁹

Adams, however, does not agree with Cicero’s belief that revolutions within a republic are inevitable. “Human nature,” according to Adams, “is incapable now of going through revolutions with temper and sobriety” as it had in the ancient world.⁹⁰ Elaborating, Adams states that “[w]ithout three orders” in every state constitution and “balance between them” the American states would be “destined to frequent unavoidable revolutions,” which would destroy their republics.⁹¹ Interestingly, Adams believes that a properly executed republic will not have to weather the storm of political revolutions, as Cicero argued, and could avoid them all together.

⁸³ Adams, *Defence of the Constitutions*, 1:xxi-xxii. “The commonwealth is the matters of the people.”

⁸⁴ Cicero, *On the Commonwealth*, 1.69.

⁸⁵ Cicero, *On the Commonwealth*, 1.69; Polybius, *The Rise of the Roman Empire*, 6.18.

⁸⁶ Adams, *Defence of the Constitutions*, 1:xix. For my translation of this quotation see above, n.62.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 1:xix.

⁸⁸ Cicero, *On the Commonwealth*, 1.45.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ Adams, *Defence of the Constitutions*, 1:viii.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

The other crucial theory on which Cicero and Adams disagreed is the potential benefits and drawbacks of monarchy. Before comparing these two statesmen's feelings towards monarchies, one must first understand Adams' pragmatic yet complex belief that all republics must attribute the power of arbitration to their monarchical or executive branches. Ever fearful of the tyranny that plagued both Imperial Rome and the British Empire, Adams never argued that America's republics should place a greater proportion of constitutional powers in their executive branches. Although Adams clearly distrusted monarchies, his pessimism regarding the inability of American citizens to maintain civic virtue compelled him to implore America's states to invoke classical constitutionalism and to empower their executives with more constitutional authority than many of his contemporaries found acceptable in the democratic fervor following America's Revolutionary War.⁹²

By the mid-1780s, Adams foresaw an unavoidable division between the rich and the poor in the fledgling United States of America, which would ultimately compel the elites and the common people to elevate their own selfish interests above the republic's welfare.⁹³ Although the aristocracy "constitute[d] the ablest and wisest men," Adams abandoned the belief that they would not oppose the "people's welfare" and proposed a solution to this problem of economic divide: each republic must have a governor who, as "the only truly disinterested figure," would act as arbiter for the disagreements between the elite and the common people.⁹⁴

Adams' reluctance to place all governmental powers in the hands of the common people, his budding distrust of the aristocracy, and his newfound reliance on executives to settle disputes between these two groups motivated many of Adams' contemporaries to label him a "crypto-monarchist."⁹⁵ While this criticism may seem valid, especially in the wake of America's Revolutionary War, it is a disingenuous statement. Adams always believed America would survive and prosper only if its states adopted classical constitutionalism within their republics.⁹⁶

In *De Republica*, Cicero states that if one cannot create a mixed constitution, the best form of government to "choose" is "monarchy."⁹⁷ Cicero further explains that "kings captivate [people] by their affection, aristocrats by their judgment, and the people by its liberty" and although all three are undesirable, monarchy is the least dangerous.⁹⁸ Adams supports Cicero's opinion that monarchical republics, such as the Roman Republic, are the best system of

⁹² Wood, *Creation of the American Republic*, 571-572, 575; Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 267.

⁹³ Wood, *Creation of the American Republic*, 579; Wood, *Radicalism of the American Republic*, 267.

⁹⁴ Adams, *Defence of the Constitutions*, 1:xxii, 175-6; Wood, *Creation of the American Republic*, 579; Wood, *Radicalism of the American Republic*, 267.

⁹⁵ Wood, *Radicalism of the American Republic*, 267.

⁹⁶ Wood refutes this critique of Adams' crypto-monarchical nature by arguing that the Constitution of Massachusetts of 1780 was "as much of a monarchy as England was a republic," clearly exemplifying that "the only meaningful classification of governments was by their degree of mixture, and the only good government was a properly mixed one." Wood's conclusions reinforce the argument that Adams did not support a pure monarchy, but rather a monarchical or "regal" republic, in which the executive acted as an arbiter between the other two branches. Wood, *Creation of the American Republic*, 579.

⁹⁷ Cicero, *On the Commonwealth*, 1.54.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

government.⁹⁹ Adams goes on to argue, however, that “a simple monarchy, if it could in reality be what it pretends to be... might be justly denominated a republic,” implying that even though monarchy may be practical in constitutional theory, it is impractical due to the corruption it inevitably promotes.¹⁰⁰ Just as Adams criticized Polybius’ faith in the benign nature of kings, Adams critiques Cicero’s view regarding simple monarchy, stating that a “limited monarchy” is only beneficial when it becomes a “monarchical republic” and is checked by “an aristocratical and a democratical power.”¹⁰¹ Through this masterful use of rhetoric, Adams acknowledges the dangers of unrestricted monarchy while simultaneously using Cicero’s support of monarchical republics to refute Mr. Turgot’s critique that the American states’ strong monarchical republics were crippling and corrupting the American Revolution’s promise of equality and liberty.

The Optimism of Adams and the Pessimism of Tacitus

Through his insightful and thorough reading of Polybius’ and Cicero’s texts, Adams created a strong foundation on which to build his argument in support of America’s state republics. Adams does not limit his readings, however, to those authors who lived during the zenith or nadir of the Roman Republic, but also relies on the retrospective writings of those who lived during the Roman Empire, such as historian Cornelius Tacitus. Born in approximately 55 CE, Tacitus, much like Adams, learned about the rise and fall of the Roman Republic only through the writings of historians and politicians such as Polybius and Cicero.¹⁰² Even though Tacitus did not live during the greatness of Rome’s republic, his views on monarchy, liberty, and the practicality of creating a republic, present both in his *Germania* and *Annals*, contributed significantly to Adams’ understanding of the republican system of government.

Germania, Tacitus’ ethnographic history of the ancient German tribes bordering the Roman Empire, provides an overview of the ancient Germans’ culture and political ideologies. The two most influential aspects of *Germania* that Adams references in *Defence of the Constitutions* are the ancient Germans’ views towards monarchy and liberty. Tacitus explains that while “[the ancient Germans] pick their kings on the basis of noble birth... their kings do not have limitless or arbitrary power.”¹⁰³ Adams, quoting Tacitus’ original Latin, states that “Reges ex nobilitate sumunt, nec regibus infinita aut libera potestas.”¹⁰⁴ This singular phrase simultaneously encompasses Adams’ beliefs that the individual chosen as a king or governor must be morally upright, but the proper political restraints must be established to ensure that the king or governor, once politically corrupted, can never possess unlimited power.

⁹⁹ Adams, *Defence of the Constitutions*, 1:xx, xxii.

¹⁰⁰ Adams, *Defence of the Constitutions*, 1:xxii.

¹⁰¹ Adams, *Defence of the Constitutions*, 1:xxii.

¹⁰² Tacitus, *The Annals of Imperial Rome*, trans. Michael Grant (New York: Penguin Books, 1996), 7ff. Tacitus, *Agricola, Germany, and Dialogue on Orators*, trans. Herbert W. Benario (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2006), 3ff [hereafter cited as Tacitus, *Germania*].

¹⁰³ Tacitus, *Germania*, 7.

¹⁰⁴ Adams, *Defence of the Constitutions*, 1:227. “The kings are from the nobility, neither unlimited nor free power is with the kings.” Tacitus, *Germania*, 1.7.

Adams, however, takes creative liberties in his analysis of ancient German politics, stating that the ancient German kings may “in all things[,] be over-ruled, at least by the nobles and people conjointly” — a claim that is not present in *Germania*.¹⁰⁵ Since Adams did not reference any other scholarly works in this section of *Defence of the Constitutions*, one may question whether Adams consciously misrepresented Tacitus’ understanding of ancient German politics. Although it may seem deceitful to place words into Tacitus’ mouth, Adams may have made a benign inference that if a king’s power were checked, it would have to be checked by either the elite or the common people. Furthermore, Adams’ linguistic distinctions ensure that his readers do not confuse his analyses with those of Tacitus. Throughout his discussion of the ancient Germans, Adams always quotes Tacitus’ *Germania* in its original Latin. Therefore, readers may logically infer that any English phrases or sentences, regardless of their juxtaposition to Latin quotations from *Germania*, should be read as Adams’ own assumptions and conclusions.

While Adams differentiates between Tacitus’ ideas and his own, this discrepancy between these two scholars’ understanding of ancient German politics provides an excellent example of the flexibility of interpretation and inaccurate conjectures that arise while translating Latin. Nevertheless, Adams’ misinterpretation regarding the power to check the ancient German kings was minor and, therefore, should not compel readers of *Defence of the Constitutions* to question either Adams’ competency in reading and translating the classics or his rationale for applying classical constitutionalism to America’s state republics.

Tacitus’ exploration of the ancient German tribes’ views towards freedom and liberty is also essential to the arguments in *Defence of the Constitutions*. For the most part, Tacitus provides a stern critique of ancient Germans’ liberties, stating that inconsistencies in the fairness of their system of government “spr[ang] from their liberty.”¹⁰⁶ When voting on political matters, the ancient German freemen “d[id] not assemble at the same time.”¹⁰⁷ Adams agrees with Tacitus that this management of “popular liberty” was ineffective.¹⁰⁸ In fact, due to the disorderly nature of these assemblies, the ancient Germans most likely assembled only to “receive the proclamations of the laws” and did not actually have “any effectual democratic check” on their government.¹⁰⁹ Adams elaborates that this lack of a democratic check derived from the ancient Germans’ flawed political system. The ancient Germans had “the three orders of kings, nobles, and commons distinctly marked,” yet they had no fixed “delineation of powers”

¹⁰⁵ Adams, *Defence of the Constitutions*, 1:227. In the original Latin of Tacitus’ *Germania* 1.7 there is no use of the words *optimus* or *populous*, which were two common words used to refer to the elite and the common people respectively. Additionally, the translation of *Germania* used for reference in this paper does not include this negation of the king’s power by the other two branches of government. Finally, the section of *Defence of the Constitutions* that examines ancient German politics is subtitled “Tacitus.” Adams uses this subtitle not only to demonstrate, rhetorically, that Tacitus is the paramount authority on ancient German politics, but also to illustrate that he will only reference the works of Tacitus in his analysis of the ancient Germans’ government. Tacitus, *Germania*, 1.7.

¹⁰⁶ Tacitus, *Germania*, 11.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ Adams, *Defence of the Constitutions*, 1:230.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

which, Adams argued, “left room for each to claim the sovereignty.”¹¹⁰ Through this examination of *Germania*, one can clearly see that Adams believes that the failing of any government, especially of any republic, always arose from the improper demarcation of appropriate powers to each branch of the government.

Even though Tacitus’ *Germania* supports Adams’ argument that a republic with the appropriate checks will not succumb to tyranny, corruption, or chaos, Adams must also address and refute Tacitus’ bitter view towards republics displayed in his *Annals*. Since the primary focus of Tacitus’ *Annals* is the history of the Roman Empire during the Julio-Claudian *principates*, he rarely provides any analysis regarding Rome’s republic. However, in Book IV of the *Annals*, Tacitus provides a brief, yet telling, opinion of republics in his analysis of the Roman Emperor Tiberius, explaining that “a mixture of the three [simple governments] is easier to applaud than achieve” but, if any people are able to achieve it, that republic “cannot last long.”¹¹¹

To use Tacitus as an authority for the republic’s supremacy, Adams must directly address Tacitus’ pessimism and convince his doubters, such as Mr. Turgot, that Tacitus would have supported America’s state republics. While Adams acknowledges that Tacitus doubts “the practicability or the duration of a republic,” he also notes that Tacitus thinks this unachievable system of government is “laudable.”¹¹² Using cunning rhetoric, Adams provides a hypothetical scenario to prove the successful nature of the America’s republics. Adams brazenly argues that if “Cicero and Tacitus could revisit the Earth” and learn that Americans, after living under England’s oppressive rule, established “governments of the ancient Goths or modern Indians” they would find Americans “reprehensible.”¹¹³ By implying that these influential Romans would be disappointed if Americans did not create state republics, Adams emotionally manipulates his readers to the illogical conclusion that Cicero and Tacitus would want Americans to live in a monarchical republic, similar to Rome, and not a democracy, as Mr. Turgot advocated.

Conclusion: The American Legacy of the Classics

Adams, by relying upon the ideas of Polybius, Cicero, and Tacitus in *Defence of the Constitutions*, validates his argument that republics formed under the principles of classical constitutionalism are the best form of government while simultaneously refuting Mr. Turgot’s criticism of the American states’ decisions to create republics, specifically monarchical republics, instead of pure democracies. The acute insights that Adams presents regarding the classics illuminates how the historical debate regarding the founders’ comprehension of the

¹¹⁰ Ibid, 1:230-231.

¹¹¹ Tacitus, *Annals*, 4.33. This harsh pragmatism regarding the effectiveness and longevity of republics can be explained from Tacitus’ experiences, as a child, living under the *principate* of Nero, who is depicted by the ancient sources not only as a jealous and power hungry tyrant, but also as the architect and arsonist of the Great Fire of Rome in 64 CE. For a brief examination of Nero’s tyrannical nature and his supposed role in the Great Fire of Rome, see Tacitus, *Annals*, 15.37-40; Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars* trans. Robert Graves (New York: Penguin Books, 2007), *Nero* 38, 53.

¹¹² Adams, *Defence of the Constitutions*, 1:xix.

¹¹³ Ibid., 1:xxii-xxiii.

classics must be realigned. To understand early American political ideology more thoroughly, historians must first analyze how America's founders used the classics to support their political ideologies both on a personal and collective level. Once historians begin to explore these questions, they will gain a much greater understanding of how classical constitutionalism helped shape not only eighteenth century American constitutionalism but also the creation of America's early republic.

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