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# "WORKING THE POLITICAL ENGINE": SAM ADAMS AND THE SPREAD OF REVOLUTION IN PROVINCIAL MASSACHUSETTS

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*Since the Revolutionary crisis with Britain began, people have debated Samuel Adam's role in America's break from the Empire. Currently, scholars are particularly interested in Adams' influence over both the people of Boston and other inhabitants of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, as they resisted British regulations. Was he able to manipulate crowd and mob behavior to enhance provincial fervor? Key to understanding Adams' influence is his conversion of rural Massachusetts to revolutionary sentiment. The purpose of this project is to assess Adam's impact as a propagandist from the mid-1760s to the early 1770s.*

Historians endeavor to combine a diverse span of records into a cohesive picture. Unfortunately, time often tears gaps in the fabric of evidence. Such is the case with Samuel Adams, American Revolutionary, whose records are far from complete. Adams considered his documents "trifles", unworthy of preservation.[1] In an often quoted incident related by his cousin, John Adams, Sam Adams burned his letters to prevent subversive use of their contents.

Despite the scarcity of personal papers, it is possible to trace Adams' ascension to prominence beginning with his 1764 writing of the "Instructions" to the Boston Representatives. Although a Harvard graduate, failure dogged Adams in every profession he chose. Monetary matters seemed foreign to his Puritan nature. R.V. Harlow, an Adams' biographer, sketched the patriot's personality around his professional ineptitude. Harlow also argued that Adams' mental instability motivated his politics and his stance against the crown. According to Harlow, Adams developed an "inferiority complex" visible in his "neurotic" writings.[2] Although Harlow presented no examples of neurosis in Adams' writings, he repeatedly reiterated its influence on the patriot.

Despite Adams' recurrent failures, none of his writings show signs of mental illness. A stronger influence than insanity drove Adams. The religious heritage of John Winthrop and the Massachusetts Bay Colony made Adams' pen name "A Puritan", more than just a pseudonym. His Puritan heritage "gave him identity" and a sense of "Duty".[3] Adams sought

to follow the example of his forefathers and make Boston a "City on a Hill" for the rest of the world to follow. Religious piety, hard work, and basic freedoms for "Elect" citizens summarized Puritan ideals, and thus those of Adams.

The son of a wealthy deacon, Adams learned religion and politics from his father. Lacking capital, small farmers and businessmen of the colony established banks which backed currency with land rather than silver. After a short time, the banks were declared illegal, with investors remaining liable. As a substantial investor in the bank, the senior Adams remained accountable for numerous debts. Samuel inherited both a personal and political anti-establishment legacy from his father and the Deacon's economic difficulties associated with the Land Bank. The conflicting Silver Bank and Land Bank supporters drew political battle lines; the former led by the Boston merchant elite while the latter garnered backing from the provincial working classes.

Although the Land Bank supporters lost their struggle, it provided the Boston roots for the Country Party of James Otis.[4] Adams naturally joined the ranks of this party and became invaluable for his newspaper propaganda. He had previous experience with journalistic resistance. In 1748 Adams jointly started a newspaper, *The Independent Advertiser*, that accused Governor William Shirley of promoting the moral decay of the colony. During the "Era of Good Feelings" that prevailed in colonial politics under Governor Shirley, the maverick Adams stood out as an herald, preceding the future storm of revolt. He steadfastly wrote in opposition to the governor, even in these calm political times. Constant antagonism toward royal and elitist authority marked Adams' career.

Following the short gubernatorial tenure of Thomas Pownall which ended in 1760, Otis and Adams promoted dissent under new Governor Francis Bernard by gaining the support of numerous societies. Masonic groups and the Merchant Club influenced many, but the Caucus Club, as the Boston political machine, wielded the decisive power to choose town officeholders. Adams joined this group and thus took a larger and larger part in determining his own offices. Opposition views and positions formed in Club meetings were passed along to town meetings. The radicals used the Club for real decisions and the town meeting became their "rubber stamp." [5] The Boston Caucus Club also served as predecessor to the Committees of Correspondence by hosting Country party sentiment before dissemination throughout the province. Although vital, the Club lacked trans-Boston power allowing the Court party to control most colonial offices through a patronage system.

Any effective opposition to the Court faction necessitated non-Boston support. Boston held only 4 of 120 seats in the colonial lower house. With all their efforts, the Country party failed to awaken provincial Massachusetts to the 1764 Sugar Act. Traditional antagonism hampered unifying efforts, but Parliament provided the catalyst to revolt with the 1765 passage of the Stamp Act. To raise funds for the depleted British treasury, the Stamp Act required all official documents to bear a government stamp purchased from local agents of the crown. Events in this early crisis period exemplify many methods which Adams utilized

throughout the revolutionary era.

Adams employed diverse tactics to spread radicalism throughout the colony. Popular uprisings in Boston heightened rural awareness and worked to intimidate Loyalists, but the mobs could also damage the image of an oppressed, innocent Boston. The mob attacks of August 14 brought the resignation of Andrew Oliver as stamp master without major loss of property. Adams declared the attacks "ought to be forever remembered in America".[6] Not all mob activities received such praise. A drunken mob ransacked the home of Lieutenant Governor Thomas Hutchinson. Although he was an arch Tory, Hutchinson bore little relationship to this particular law, and the personal destruction of his home outraged many Bostonians and provincials. Adams avoided rousting up a possibly violent mob when he had an intelligent (partially literate) and reasoning public he could influence. "Violence & Submission," Adams later warned, "would at this time be equally fatal." [7] Some accused Adams of instigating the mobs and choosing their methods. Evidence clearly linked Adams to the demonstrations, however he avoided violence because of the counter-productive effects.

To prevent the martyrdom of Hutchinson in the eyes of both rural and Boston citizens, Adams resorted to a repeated tactic: lying. He fabricated a story implicating the lieutenant governor in the passage of the Stamp Act. Publication of this story and an Adams' letter to London which warded off imperial retribution minimized detrimental effects. Such skillful creation of propaganda to the point of lying marked Adams' use of the press.

Following the repeal of the Stamp Act, the first of numerous lulls in radical sentiment occurred. Victory on an issue brought the Loyalist goal of peace and quiet. During these periods Adams engineered dissent any way possible, such as by shifting criticism to local "oligarchs". During the Stamp Act crisis, Adams attacked Hutchinson's simultaneous officeholding and forced the Tory to resign his county judgeship. Adams continued in this vein condemning this practice.[8]

Imperial inaction left few rabble-rousing issues for Adams to exploit.[9] Fortunately, Parliament levied the Townsend Acts in late 1767. The Boston merchants retaliated by enacting a non-importation pact, an idea started in New York. Adams and the Whigs adopted this tactic as their own and initiated numerous boycotts beginning in 1768. Non-importation agreements harmed the London merchants and thus the Whigs generated economic pressure for Parliamentary concessions. These covenants held two difficulties for the Radicals. First, non-importation hurt Boston merchants as well as those in London. Second, Adams' Caucus Club could not implement them alone. Provincial participation was a prerequisite for any measure of success. Adams promoted support via the *Boston Gazette*. The printed voice of the Boston radicals, the *Gazette* influenced many people via its wide circulation. In numerous articles, Adams publicly berated opponents and praised those complying with the boycott.

The governor and the Whigs clashed again after the Whig controlled legislature drafted a statement addressed to the legislatures of the other colonies, opposing London's authority. Governor Bernard dissolved the legislature after the body refused to rescind the circular letter.

In response to this action to the stationing of troops in Boston, the Whigs called for an unprecedented convention of all provincial towns to discuss the supposed usurpation of colonial rights by the actions of Parliament and the governor. Whether or not the 1768 Convention served an additional purpose, it served as a model for the later more serious "Meeting of the People" in the Convention of 1772.[10]

The quartering of troops coincided with the calming of tensions. Traditionally apprehensive concerning standing armies, the colonists regarded the placement of professional soldiers in their homes as a threat to their personal liberties. Adams struck this emotional chord, haranguing the injustice of this occupation. New York newspapers began printing a "Journal of Events" relating alleged atrocities committed by British troops. Adams fabricated most of these stories, but they still swayed many readers. Throughout 1769, clashes between citizens and soldiers became a reality and that winter saw the death of a young boy. Adams virtually angelized the child in the *Gazette* and the funeral procession became a Whig rally. By March, Adams had the Bostonians incensed about the troops, and violence erupted. After weeks of enduring abusive taunts by Bostonians, British troops fired into an unarmed mob. The "Boston Massacre" outraged the entire town and Adams quickly forced concessions from the governor including the removal of the unit to prevent further bloodshed.

Following the Massacre, tensions again cooled, and as he had before, Adams provided invaluable maintenance of radical sentiment, prolonging political resentment fostered by the Massacre. He sought to end the old Boston/country rivalry and mistrust by recurrently reminding the outlying towns of the bloodshed wrought by the dreaded "lobsters" and that they too could suffer the humiliation of occupation.[11]

Complacency gripped the colony and signs of the radical fervor from the previous crisis all but disappeared. Adams needed a new vehicle to spread Radical views to the countryside. Adams had watched the rise and fall of correspondence societies in New York, and realized the value of such societies in marshaling grassroots support. Committees of Correspondence had been used before, but not to promote political actions. Adams needed a justification to form the network of committees. Through the fall of 1772, he authored numerous articles attacking the London plan to pay the salaries of judges.

The formation of the Boston Committee of Correspondence (BCC) defied conventional means of political opposition. To justify this unorthodox creation, the Whig controlled Boston town meeting petitioned the governor to allow the General Assembly to convene in response to the debate over judicial salaries. Predictably, Governor Hutchinson refused, thus granting Adams justification to form the BCC.[12] Adams summarized the impact of the refusal:

our requests have been so reasonable that in refusing to comply with them he must have put himself in the wrong, . . . the Consequence of which will be, that such measures . . . will be more reconcilable even to cautious minds, & thus we may expect that Unanimity which we wish for.[13]

Indeed: "Put your enemies in the wrong" was Adams' first commandment in politics and he embodied it in all his actions. The BCC became the bugle for the Whig message and urged other towns to follow Boston's lead. During the winter of 1772, many provincial towns formed committees and stimulated reciprocal opposition sentiment. Through the BCC, Adams bridged the gap between Boston and the rest of the colony. His success at this endeavor is evident in the disappearance of the town versus country animosity endemic to Massachusetts politics. This union of Boston and the colony was never more important than after the passage of the Boston Port Act. Although evidence is mixed as to Adams role in the Tea Party, he maneuvered the situation into a stage play for his political use. Without the united coalition throughout the colony, Adams would have been unable to entertain such a confrontation.

Unlike Otis, who viewed his reforms within an imperial context, Adams recognized the vital importance of provincial Massachusetts. Boston and the BCC served as the hub of the revolutionary wheel in the colony. The metropolis channeled political sentiments (from itself and other towns) through the spokes of the Committees of Correspondence to the provincial rim. Adams and his creation, the BCC, exercised restraint in their unique, key position. Adams maintained a deference to rural "sovereignty" in their views. He marshaled rural support via this respect, some flattery, and constant media manipulation.[14] Because of his confidence in the power of the people he influenced, patience characterized Adams politics.

Historians continually debate the significance of Sam Adams.[15] They present diverse portrayals of him as a politically pathological liar, a "professional agitator" and controller of mobs, a "Pioneer in Propaganda," and a general troublemaker. Perhaps the most pertinent evaluations of Adams came from his opponents, such as Hutchinson and General Gage, who held unique perspectives on the patriot's activities. Both regarded Adams as the master rebel and only Adams and John Hancock were exempted from Gage's offer of amnesty.[16]

However, none of these poignant phrases captures the true nature of Adams. Motivated into politics in part to restore Puritan values and to challenge the heirs of his father's opponents, Adams recurrently reduced the struggle between colonial and imperial authority to local partisan clashes between himself and the colonial oligarchy. Adams resorted to this tactic often during calmer periods. During a crisis, he was simply one of many; but during lean times Adams proved indispensable to rekindling the Whig fire.

Far from being omnipotent, Adams often experienced setbacks and recovered. The Nullification Bill failure in October 1765, the initial rejection of the Solemn League and Covenant of 1774, the sporadic support and then defection by the Merchants' Club, all show limits on Adams' ability to control events during multiple crises. Indeed, Adams played an important role, but not as the head of a mob or a political oligarchy.

Through the BCC and the *Gazette*, Adams waged a decades long war of words. To

term him the "Pioneer in Propaganda" implies the prevalence of untruth, whereas Adams put forth his perception of the truth, successfully changing the view of others. Certainly the manipulation of public information remains key in political agitation, whether in Adams' period or during modern conflicts. Adams represents a revolutionary innovator of media use, and a constant member of the Revolutionary vanguard.

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## REFERENCES

1. Samuel Adams to Samuel Savage, Nov. 1, 1778. Quoted from Pauline Maier, *Old Revolutionaries: Political Lives in Age of Samuel Adams* (New York: Vintage Books, 1980), 35.
2. Ralph Harlow, *Samuel Adams: Promoter of the American Revolution* (New York: Holt and Co., 1923), 37, 170.
3. Maier, 42.
4. The Country Party refers to the group (headed initially by James Otis) which began opposition to first the Governor Francis Bernard administration and later imperial authority in general. The party backing the administration termed them "Whigs" (an English reference to the "Loyal Opposition" and later "Radicals" and also the insulting term "faction". Whig and Country Party are interchangeable terms; however the term Radicals is not inclusive of the entire opposition, only the more vocal group (including the "Loyal Nine") centered in Boston. As the mainstream of the opposition lost its effective leader, Otis, the Radicals under Adams took control until almost all Whigs were Radicals.
5. John Miller, *Sam Adams: Pioneer in Propaganda*. 2d ed., (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1960), 39.
6. Samuel Adams, *The Writings of Samuel Adams*, edited by Harry Cushing (New York: Octagon Books, 1968), II 201.
7. Ibid., III 124.
8. Ibid., I 129.
9. John Miller, *Sam Adams: Pioneer in Propaganda*, 2d ed. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1960) 103.

10. See Miller, "The Massachusetts Convention of 1768", *New England Quarterly* VII, 445-474.

11. The *Gazette* is replete with examples of Adams allusions to the threat posed to the entire colony as well as the other colonies. For a typical example, see the article signed "Candidus" in the *Boston Gazette*, June 27, 1774.

12. For a detailed account of the formation of the BCC, see Richard D. Brown, *Revolutionary Politics in Massachusetts* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970), 38-57.

13. Samuel Adams, *The Writings of Samuel Adams*, edited by Harry Cushing (New York: Octagon Books, 1968), II 346.

14. For an example of his flattery and deference to the other towns, see "Candidus" in the *Gazette*, December 14, 1772.

15. For the best historiographic overview of the writings about Adams, see Maier, 8-16.

16. See references in Miller, 61; and Harlow, 69-70.