



## Remember the Ladies: Abigail Adams and Respect

### Handout A: Narrative

#### BACKGROUND

In the spring of 1774, the British Parliament passed the Coercive Acts to punish Boston for the Tea Party. These acts closed the harbor to trade and granted royal authorities more power to govern Massachusetts. In order to coordinate a unified response to British tyranny in Boston, John Adams met with other delegates at the First Continental Congress in September and October of 1774. During the fateful spring of 1775, war erupted when the British and Americans fought at the Battles of Lexington and Concord. As Adams and other delegates to Congress assembled and created a Continental Army commanded by George Washington, the two armies engaged once again at the Battle of Bunker Hill in June. At this point, Adams was a fervent supporter of independence, but he knew it was best to wait until the people and members of Congress galvanized around the idea. In January 1776, the publication of Thomas Paine's pamphlet *Common Sense* rallied the people around independence. Adams would be instrumental in getting Congress to approve a resolution for states creating their own governments in May. Over the next two months, he served on the committee that drafted the Declaration of Independence and almost single-handedly influenced Congress to adopt the ringing statement of natural rights and self-government on July 4, 1776.

During this period, John Adams was one of the most diligent public servants in Congress, and he had to endure lengthy, painful separations from his wife, Abigail Adams, and their children. He longed for home but felt the pull of duty to the republic during the historical moment of separation from Great Britain. Meanwhile, Abigail and the children lived frightfully close to the war zone as the British occupied Boston. She had to take care of the home and farm in John's absence and educate their children without his help. She suffered the privations of war and suffered from the various illnesses that swept through Boston, one of which claimed the life of her mother. John and Abigail Adams were devoted spouses and kept up a lengthy and historically important correspondence about domestic and public affairs. One of those letters raised an important issue about natural rights and equality for all people.

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Abigail Adams had finally gotten her children to bed and was exhausted. Ever since her husband, John, had decided to serve at the Continental Congress, she had been alone and forced to run their home and farm as well as educate the children. It was overwhelming, but Abigail tried not to complain too often. She reveled in her quiet time of a still house and a cup of homespun tea. She would dip into the books in John's extensive library and read by candlelight. She would also pen letters to John, American historian Mercy Otis Warren, and British historian Catherine Macaulay.

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Then, she would collapse in her empty bed and drift off to sleep before tackling another exhausting day the following morning.

While many of the letters to John were personal letters expressing love, or relating details of their suffering on the home front, Abigail was a well-educated woman who would often intelligently comment on public affairs to the three correspondents. Her letters revealed a strong and thoughtful patriotism and a deep commitment to the cause of America during the American Revolution.

For example, one of the late-night letters that Abigail wrote was to Macaulay commenting on the effects of the Coercive Acts on Boston. She wrote of the “miseries and distresses brought upon us by the late inhumane acts of the British parliament.” Adams described the scene in Boston: “We are invaded with fleets and Armies, our commerce not only obstructed, but totally ruined.”

In her letters to Mercy Otis Warren, Abigail sounded many of the same themes. Echoing the words of Patrick Henry’s “Liberty or Death” speech, she asserted, “Is it not better to die the last of British freemen than live the first of British slaves?” She argued for liberty, natural rights, and republican self-government by the consent of the governed as would soon appear in the Declaration of Independence. “We cannot be free without being secure in our property, that we cannot be secure in our property if without our consent others may as by right take it away.”

During one cold night in late November 1775 that caused her to “shudder at the approach of winter,” Abigail dipped the nib of her feather into some ink and wrote a letter to John. She had a few guests staying with her because of the British occupation, which caused her to relish the quiet evening hours even more. She had time to reflect on politics in this letter to her husband. “If we separate from Britain, what code of laws will be established? How shall we be governed so as to retain our liberties?” Abigail asked as she reflected on the prospect of constitution-making after independence.

After John had a brief trip home for Christmas and Abigail had an opportunity to read Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense* as well as her husband’s essay, *Thoughts on Government*, she pondered about the principle of universal natural rights. On the last day of March in 1776, Abigail wrote to John, “I long to hear that you have declared an independency.” In declaring rights and writing a constitution, Abigail asked her husband to “remember the ladies and be more generous and favorable to them than your ancestors.” Thinking of the tyranny of unlimited government by the British, Abigail applied the principle to men and women. “Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the husbands. Remember, all men would be tyrants if they could.” Although not completely serious, Abigail warned of rebellion, just like the patriots, if women were not allowed to enjoy consent of the governed. “If particular care is not paid to the ladies, we are determined to foment a rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any laws in which we have no voice or representation.”

Abigail did not question the idea of separate spheres for the sexes in which men worked outside the home and entered politics while women cared for the home and raised children. However, she argued for respecting women by recognizing that they enjoyed the same natural rights and should live under the same consensual government as men. She hated the enslavement of

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African Americans as a violation of revolutionary principles and now argued for women's equality as well.

When John received the letter in Philadelphia, he was probably shocked to read its contents and thought his wife was joking. "As to your extraordinary code of laws, I cannot but laugh," he replied. He gave his wife a gentle rebuke, writing, "You are so saucy." However, John admitted that women had much more authority in marriages, families, and society than the formal law would admit. "We [men] dare not exert our power in its full latitude. We are obliged to go fair and softly, and, in practice, you know we are the subjects. We have only the name of masters, and [must not] give up this, which would completely subject us to the despotism of the petticoat."

Abigail was frustrated by her husband's response and would not let the issue drop. She replied, "I cannot say that I think you are very generous to the ladies; for, whilst you are proclaiming peace and good-will to men, emancipating all nations, you insist upon retaining an absolute power over wives." She warned that "arbitrary power is...liable to be broken." She explained, "We [women] have it in our power, not only to free ourselves, but to subdue our masters [men], and, without violence, throw both your natural and legal authority at our feet."

In this remarkable letter, Abigail Adams challenged her husband and the United States to live up to its revolutionary principles of universal natural rights and self-government for all people. She pointed out the contradiction that women had the same rights as men but were not enjoying them to the same degree. During the time of the American Founding, Abigail Adams asked that the natural rights of women be respected in the new nation.