

The Representation Fighters

Abigail Adams, "Remember the Ladies" Letters (1776)

Freedom
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Equality

*** How does Abigail Adams see representation in America? ***

John Adams was very central to the Revolutionary Era and the founding of the United States, present along the whole way from the Boston Massacre to the Constitutional Convention to serving as the second president. His wife, Abigail, was educated, outspoken, and widely known to be very much respected and loved by her husband.

Notes

ABIGAIL ADAMS TO JOHN ADAMS (MARCH 31, 1776)

I long to hear that you have declared an independency. And, by the way, in the new code of laws which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make, I desire you would remember the ladies and be more generous and favorable to them than your ancestors.

Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the husbands.

Remember, all men would be tyrants if they could. If particular care and attention 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.

That your sex are naturally tyrannical is a truth so thoroughly established as to admit of no dispute; but such of you as wish to be happy willingly give up -- the harsh tide of master for the more tender and endearing one of friend.

Why, then, not put it out of the power of the vicious and the lawless to use us with cruelty with immunity?

Men of sense in all ages **abhor** those customs which treat us only as the (servants) of your sex; regard us then as being placed by Providence under your protection, and in imitation of the Supreme Being make use of that power only for our happiness.

JOHN ADAMS TO ABIGAIL ADAMS (APRIL 14, 1776)

"As to your extraordinary code of laws, I cannot but laugh.

"We have been told that our struggle has loosened the bonds of government everywhere; that children and apprentices were disobedient; that schools and colleges were grown turbulent; that Indians slighted their guardians, and negroes grew insolent to their masters.

"But your letter was the first hint that another tribe, more numerous and powerful than all the rest, were grown discontented.

"This is rather too coarse a compliment, but you are so saucy, I won't blot it out.

"Depend upon it, we know better than to repeal our masculine systems. Although they are in full force, you know they are little more than theory. We dare not exert our power in its full scope. 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 rather than give up this, which would completely subject us to the despotism of the petticoat, I hope General Washington and all our brave heroes would fight."

ABIGAIL ADAMS TO JOHN ADAMS (MAY 7, 1776)

"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.

"But you must remember that arbitrary power is like most other things which are very hard, very liable to be broken; and, notwithstanding all your wise laws and maxims, we have it in our power, not only to free ourselves, but to subdue our masters, and without violence, throw both your natural and legal authority at our feet."

Annotations

For each fighter, annotate for their efforts to ensure that representation is practiced in America as well as for their effective use of ethos, logos, or pathos which helped persuade change.

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Dorothea Dix, Appeal on Behalf of the Insane (1843)

*** How does Dorothea Dix see representation in America? ***

The 1830s and 40s embodied a era of reform spurred out of Christian revivalism. This spirit led many middle-class American women to devote their lives to improving society, taking up causes such as abolishing slavery and eliminating alcohol consumption. Dorothea Dix committed more than thirty years of her life to improving the treatment of the mentally ill. Dix traveled around the country to expose abuses in insane asylums and other facilities and to argue for more humane care. In this excerpt, Dix makes a successful appeal to the Massachusetts legislature to provide better facilities for these people.

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I come to present the strong claims of suffering humanity. I come to place before the Legislature of Massachusetts the condition of the miserable, the **desolate**, the outcast. I come as the advocate of helpless, forgotten, insane, and idiotic men and women; of beings sunk to a condition from which the most unconcerned would start with real horror; of beings **wretched** in our prisons, and more wretched in our **almshouses**. And I cannot suppose it needful to employ earnest persuasion, or stubborn argument, in order to **arrest** and fix attention upon a subject only the more strongly pressing in its claims because it is revolting and disgusting in its details.

I proceed, gentlemen, briefly to call your attention to the present state of insane persons confined within this Commonwealth, in cages, closets, cellars, stalls, pens! Chained, naked, beaten with rods, and lashed into obedience.

Lincoln. A woman in a cage.

Medford. One idiotic subject chained, and one in a closed stall for seventeen years.

Brookfield. One man caged, comfortable.

Granville. One often closed confined; now losing the use of his limbs from lack of exercise.

Charlemont. One man caged. Savory. One man caged.

Dedham. The insane disadvantageously placed in the jail. In the almshouse, two females in stalls, situated in the main building; lie in wooden bunks filled with straw; always shut up. One of these subjects is supposed curable. The overseers of the poor have declined giving her a trial at the hospital, as I was informed, on account of expense. . . .

Besides the above, I have seen many who, part of the year, are chained or caged. The use of cages all but universal. Hardly a town but can refer to some not distant period of using them; chains are less common; negligence frequent; willful abuse less frequent than sufferings proceeding from ignorance, or want of consideration. I encountered during the last three months many poor creatures wandering reckless and unprotected through the country. Innumerable accounts have been sent me of persons who had roved away unwatched and unsearched after, and I have heard that responsible persons, controlling the almshouses, have not thought themselves **culpable** in sending away from their shelter, to cast upon the chances of remote relief, insane men and women. These, left on the highways, unfriended and incompetent to control or direct their own movements, sometimes have found refuge in the hospital, and others have not been traced.

Gentlemen, I commit to you this sacred cause. Your action upon this subject will affect the present and future condition of hundreds and of thousands.

In this legislation, as in all things, may you exercise that "wisdom which is the breath of the power of God."

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Henry David Thoreau, from "Civil Disobedience" (1849)

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*** How does Henry David Thoreau see representation in America? ***

A leading transcendentalist writer in the 1840s and 1850s, Henry David Thoreau celebrated the individual and the natural world. His most famous book, Walden, logs his solitary experiment living in the woods, independent, self-reliant, and reflective. In this essay, Thoreau issues his strong beliefs about the real purpose of the Mexican American War and the use of slave labor in America.

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Witness the present Mexican war, the work of comparatively a few individuals using the standing government as their tool; for, in the outset, the people would not have consented to this measure.

This government never of itself furthered any enterprise, but by the **alacrity** with which it got out of its way. It does not keep the country free. It does not settle the West. It does not educate. The character **inherent** in the American people has done all that has been accomplished; and it would have done somewhat more, if the government had not sometimes got in its way.

How does it become a man to behave toward this American government today? I answer, that he cannot without disgrace be associated with it. I cannot for an instant recognize that political organization as my government which is the slave's government also.

Under a government which imprisons any unjustly, the true place for a just man is also a prison. The proper place today, the only place which Massachusetts has provided for her freer and less **desponding** spirits, is in her prisons, to be put out and locked out of the State by her own act, as they have already put themselves out by their principles. It is there that the fugitive slave, and the Mexican prisoner on parole, and the Indian come to plead the wrongs of his race should find them; on that separate, but more free and honorable, ground, where the State places those who are not with her, but against her—the only house in a slave State in which a free man can **abide** with honor. If any think that their influence would be lost there, and their voices no longer **afflict** the ear of the State, they do not know by how much truth is stronger than error, nor how much more eloquently and effectively he can combat injustice who has experienced a little in his own person.

Cast your whole vote, not a strip of paper merely, but your whole influence. If the alternative is to keep all just men in prison, or give up war and slavery, the State will not hesitate which to choose. If a thousand men were not to pay their tax-bills this year, that would not be a violent and bloody measure, as it would be to pay them, and enable the State to commit violence and shed innocent blood. Through this wound a man's real manhood and immortality flow out, and he bleeds to an everlasting death. I see this blood flowing now.

For my own part, I should not like to think that I ever rely on the protection of the State. But, if I deny the authority of the State when it presents its tax-bill, it will soon take and waste all my property, and so harass me and my children without end.

This makes it impossible for a man to live honestly, and at the same time comfortably. It will not be worth the while to accumulate property; that would be sure to go again. You must hire or squat somewhere, and raise but a small crop, and eat that soon. You must live within yourself, and depend upon yourself always tucked up and ready for a start, and not have many affairs. Confucius said: "If a state is governed by the principles of reason, poverty and misery are subjects of shame; if a state is not governed by the principles of reason, riches and honors are the subjects of shame." Until I want the protection of Massachusetts to be extended to me in some distant Southern port, I can afford to refuse allegiance to Massachusetts, and her right to my property and life. It costs me less in every sense to incur the penalty of disobedience to the State than it would to obey.

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Terence V. Powderly, Preamble to the Constitution of the Knights of Labor (1878)

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*** How does Terence V. Powderly see representation in America? ***

The Knights of Labor began as a secret organization, dedicated to bringing all workers together into one national union. Terence V. Powderly later headed the organization at its height in the late 1800s. Considered more radical than its rival union, the American Federation of Labor (AFL), it pushed for boarder social reforms in addition to better workplace conditions.

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The recent alarming development and aggression of **aggregated** wealth, which, unless checked, will inevitably lead to the **pauperization** and hopeless **degradation** of the **toiling** masses. A check should be placed upon its power and upon unjust accumulation, and a system adopted which will secure to the laborer the fruits of his toil; and as this much-desired object can only be accomplished by the thorough unification of labor.

We have formed the Knights of Labor with a view of securing the organization and direction, by co-operative effort, of the power of the **industrial classes**; and we submit to the world the objects sought to be accomplished by our organization, calling upon all who believe in securing "the greatest good to the greatest number" to aid and assist us:

I. To bring within the folds of organization every department of productive industry, making knowledge a standpoint for action, and industrial and moral worth, not wealth, the true standard of individual and national greatness.

II. To secure to the toilers a proper share of the wealth that they create; more of the leisure that rightfully belongs to them; more society advantages; all those rights and privileges necessary to make them capable of enjoying, appreciating, defending and **perpetuating** the blessings of good government.

...

V. The reserving of the public lands—the heritage of the people—for the actual settler; not another acre for railroads or **speculators**.

VI. The **abrogation** of all laws that do not bear equally upon capital and labor and the adopting of measures providing for the health and safety of those engaged in mining, manufacturing or building pursuits.

VII. The enactment of laws to compel chartered corporations to pay their employees weekly, in full, for labor performed during the preceding week, in the lawful money of the country.

...

XI. The prohibition of the employment of children in workshops, mines and factories before attaining their fourteenth year.

...

XIII. To secure for both sexes equal pay for equal work.

XIV. The reduction of the hours of labor to eight per day, so that the laborers may have more time for social enjoyment and intellectual improvement, and be enabled to **reap** the advantages **conferred** by the labor-saving machinery which their brains have created.