for researcH and writing

1. The power of letters. More than 1,100 of John and Abigail Adams’s letters are online at the Massachusetts Historical Society. This site provides direct links to specific letters. Reading with a partner, visit the website and select two letters—one written by John, a second by Abigail—to analyze and share with classmates. What do these letters reveal about political, social and cultural issues? What do they say about John and Abigail Adams? How do you really know it in your heart as well as your mind? Unless you feel it, you really can’t have learned about John Adams’s value.

2. A controversial measure. In the election of 1800—which John Adams narrowly lost to Thomas Jefferson—members of Congress recognized the need to change the system of voting within the Electoral College. What occurred to prompt this change, and in what extent did the Twelfth Amendment remedy this problem? Find out more about how and why this piece of legislation was enacted.

3. The question of slavery. Four of America’s first five Presidents—Washington, Jefferson, Madison and Monroe—were slaveholders from Virginia. Where did John Adams stand on the question of slavery? gather evidence from Adams’s letters, speeches and other writings that reveal his stance on this issue. Then select one of the other four Presidents named above and find out how he justified his support for slavery. Write the text of a debate that Adams might have had with the President you have chosen.

4. Amending the Constitution. After the election of 1800—which John Adams narrowly lost to Thomas Jefferson—members of Congress recognized the need to change the system of voting within the Electoral College. What occurred to prompt this change, and in what extent did the Twelfth Amendment remedy this problem? Find out more about how and why this piece of legislation was enacted.

5. The election of 2008. Using what you have learned about John Adams’s values and philosophy through your viewing and reading, what position do you think he would take on the major issues of the 2008 presidential campaign? Choose one or more issues facing Americans today—such as the war on terrorism, health care, international relations, global warming—and draft a speech that Adams could deliver on this topic. How would the initial stand for? How was this image adapted during the Revolutionary era? Next, invite students to read the profile of Adams on pages 2 and 3, along with the timeline at the bottom of these pages. As a class, make a list of scenes from Adams’s life that you would dramatize if you were creating a miniseries on him. Ask: Where would you choose to start your exploration of Adams’s life? Why?

White Viewing

As students watch John Adams, ask them to consider the following argument made by historian David McCullough: “John Adams hasn’t received the attention he deserves.” As they view the miniseries, have them note moments in Adams’s life for which he deserves to be remembered. In addition, have students reflect on the following description of John Adams: “He united the states of America.” What evidence do students find within the miniseries to support this point?

After Viewing

John Adams encourages a lively class discussion on a variety of topics. Subjects to explore include:

Image of John Adams

Ask: How is John Adams portrayed in the series? What do you see as his strengths and weaknesses? What words would you use to characterize his personality? Which scenes shed the most light on his values and views?

A Controversial Decision

In Part 1 of the miniseries, Adams agrees to defend British soldiers accused of firing at colonists during the Boston Massacre. Why does Adams make this controversial decision? What is the outcome of the case? What price does Adams pay for this decision? Do you see a contradiction between Adams’s identity as an American patriot and his role as a defender of British soldiers? Explain.

The President and First Lady

How is Abigail Adams depicted in the series? In what ways does she influence her husband’s political decisions? Describe a scene in which you gain insight into her character. What do you see as her core values? Now imagine that you could interview Abigail Adams. What three questions would you ask her?

The Continental Congress

What role did John Adams play at the Continental Congress? What do you see as his most important contribution as a member of the Congress? (To explore this topic further, distribute the reproducible worksheet on page 3 of this guide.)

The White House Years

What were some of the key challenges that Adams faced as President? What did Adams see as his greatest legacy? Do you agree? In your estimation, how should Adams be remembered?

Books


Web Sites

www.poweroftheletter.com In today’s world, it’s easy to forget the value of a heartfelt, handwritten letter. Visit this site—Power of the Letter—in support of the Postal Service’s My Dearest Friend program. Teachers can present an electronic tour and hands-on activity kits and teach their students to write a heartfelt letter.

www.nps.gov/ada A virtual tour of the Adams National Historical Park, featuring birthplaces of Presidents John Adams and John Quincy Adams and the story of four generations of the Adams family. Digital versions and transcripts of the more than 1,100 letters exchanged between John and Abigail Adams.

www.amahotlist.org/ada/sad.html Digital versions and transcripts of the more than 1,100 letters exchanged between John and Abigail Adams.


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www.history.org/historyteacher This guide is designed to give educators strategies and resources for viewing and discussion of the HBO miniseries and of John Adams’s life. John Adams chronicles a turbulent period, and the filmmakers do not shy away from portraying violence as well as brief nudity. Accordingly, teachers may find it useful to preview the miniseries prior to assigning it to students.

Before Viewing

To provide background on the life and times of John Adams, you might distribute copies of the TIME magazine created to accompany the miniseries. Ask students to turn to the Notebook feature on page 4 and respond to the quotes in the Verbatim section. What is the origin of the “Join, or Die” cartoon, and what do the initials stand for? How was this image adapted during the Revolutionary era? Next, invite students to read the profile of Adams on pages 2 and 3, along with the timeline at the bottom of these pages. As a class, make a list of scenes from Adams’s life that you would dramatize if you were creating a miniseries on him. Ask: Where would you choose to start your exploration of Adams’s life? Why?

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The Great Question of Independence

On July 2, 1776, the Continental Congress made a momentous decision. The thirteen American colonies voted to declare independence from Great Britain. John Adams reflected on the enormity of this event in a letter to his wife Abigail—one of the more than 1,100 letters that the couple exchanged during their marriage. An excerpt from Adams’s letter appears at right. As you read this letter, underline passages that reveal Adams’s views on “the great question of independence,” and circle passages in which Adams predicts the events of July 2, 1776, will be remembered. Then use the questions below to deepen your understanding of this historic document.

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

For Further Exploration
Working in pairs or small groups, conduct research to find out why July 4—and not July 2, as Adams predicted—is observed as Independence Day. What happened in the Continental Congress on July 4, 1776? What date appears on the Declaration of Independence? When was the Declaration adopted by the Continental Congress? When was it actually signed? In your opinion, would it be more logical to observe Independence Day on July 3 instead of July 4? Discuss—or stage a class debate on this question.

Q: Why did Adams take on the job of defending the British soldiers who shot at the crowd in the Boston Massacre?
A: Well, I think that’s one of the most noble acts of his entire life. And it ought to be a subject that’s taught in every school. Nobody wanted to defend those soldiers. [The British] had cut down American citizens with their musket fire. And they came to Adams, Sam Adams and others, and said, “Will you defend these soldiers? Nobody else will.”

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

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

Q: What is the best way to understand this? Is it important to know the vocabulary, the lines. It’s a great screenplay. I have a feeling that if John and Abigail Adams came back and saw it, they’d say, “Pretty amazing. You got us. That’s it. That’s the way it was.”

Q: What is the process of writing about the process of writing? Does it help to desde the Cold War on this issue, and to describe it in a way that for Americans?”
A: Absolutely. That’s where he was at his best: at calling forth to people to do what is right. When he got up in the Continental Congress in Philadelphia to make the case for passing the Declaration of Independence, he was up against one of the greatest lawyers of his day, John Dickinson, who was against signing the Declaration of Independence. It wasn’t that he was against the cause, but he was against signing that piece of paper then. And he gave a brilliant presentation of his case. Then Adams stood up and argued for the other side. And they voted with Adams. It was never a foregone conclusion that they would vote for the Declaration of Independence. That happened on July 2.

Q: And what was the significance of the Battle of Lexington and Concord?
A: It was a mere three electoral votes over Jefferson. Adams is elected President in 1796—by a mere three electoral votes over Jefferson.

Q: What is your opinion of John Adams’s view of America's future in this letter? Point to specific lines in the text to support your answer.
A: I will think me transported with enthusiasm from non. I am well aware of the toil and blood and treasure, that it will cost us to maintain this Declaration, and support and defend these States. Yet through all the gloom I can see the rays of ravishing light and glory. I can see that the end is more worth than all the means. And that posterity will triumph in that day’s transaction, even although we should rely, which it trust in God we shall not.