

John Adams HBO Miniseries

A REVIEW

by

Kelly Jo Eldredge and Eric L. Mott

Authors Eric Mott and Kelly Jo Eldredge review the HBO original miniseries John Adams in an article of seven parts, one for each segment of the movie. In a tradition started with their first book, *We Met at Starbucks: A Love Story*, they offer their thoughts in their conversational “He Said/She Said” format.

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Passion on the Page

I must study politics and war . . . so that my sons will have the liberty to study mathematics and philosophy. My sons must study navigation, commerce, and agriculture so that their children will have the right to study painting, poetry, and music.

—John Adams, from the John Adams
screenplay by Kirk Ellis, explaining why
he doesn't attend the opera

He's got it worked out.

—French ambassador to the United States, in response

Introduction

HBO FILMS presents JOHN ADAMS,
a movie in seven parts.

EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS: Tom Hanks and Gary Goetzman

SCREENPLAY: Kirk Ellis

DIRECTOR: Tom Hooper

BASED ON THE BOOK BY: David McCullough

PAUL GIAMATTI as John Adams

LAURA LINNEY as Abigail Adams

STEPHEN DILLANE as Thomas Jefferson

DANNY HUSTON as Samuel Adams

DAVID MORSE as George Washington

We Said:

At first we see a man on horseback riding across a snowy landscape. The horse plods and staggers wearily, while the man sits listlessly in the saddle with barely enough will to stay there, wincing against the cold. The pair looks as if they dread arriving at their destination as much as they dread where they came from—stuck in the midst of a dark winter’s evening.

Presently, the man passes under a tree from which grisly effigies hang and twist in the wind. A sign around the neck of one proclaims, “Tory,” and we feel a chill of anger as bitter as the weather. The trunk of the same tree sports a poster with the iconic symbol of the snake chopped into eight parts and the caption “Join, or Die.” We get a feeling now of when, and where, we are: Colonial America.

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The cold, angry landscape symbolizes where the American colonies stood in the year 1770: stuck in a barren place between British rule and self-realization. Unwilling to abide British tyranny much longer, but equally reluctant to move forward with independence, the colonies dreaded, with stooped shoulders like the rider, the consequences either path might bring.

We learn later the solitary man on horseback is John Adams. He is plodding reluctantly toward his role in the Revolution and his place in American history; this movie is his story. The dark, lonely opening scene builds a curiosity and suspense immediately for the viewer and offers hope that this story that most of us know, or think we know, will be retold in a compelling manner.

This review will be an essay in seven parts, one for each segment of the miniseries. Each part will offer dual “he said/she said” impressions from Eric and Kelly as they share their views on the significance of various scenes that impacted them.

This miniseries promises to deepen our appreciation for our national history and the exemplary men and women who helped shape it. We hope to share this new appreciation with you.

[Next: Part One – Join or Die](#)

Join or Die



Woodcut by Benjamin Franklin, 1754
Library of Congress

He Said:

Part one of the miniseries, *Join or Die*, captivated me with the suspense of not knowing until the end whether or not John Adams would ever lend his voice to the cause of freedom for the American colonies. I already knew from history that he would, but I occasionally doubted this fact throughout the viewing of the story. Foreknowledge of the outcome does not in any way diminish the enjoyment of this compelling movie.

John Adams appears initially as a complicated man. At times he seems no more than a country lawyer, without pretense other than to provide for his family and honor his love for justice. Other times, however, we see the gleam of ambition in his eye, as when the attorney general of Massachusetts asks him rhetorically why he moved his legal practice to Boston, anyway: To go unnoticed?

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Either way we learn he is a principled man when he agrees to take on the unpopular case of British army troopers accused of murder in the infamous Boston Massacre incident. John states that the last thing any man should be without in a free country is access to fair and impartial legal counsel. Indeed, he feels so strongly about this that he argues publicly with his own cousin, Samuel Adams, in the streets of Boston regarding the matter and needs to be restrained by his wife, Abigail.

He wins that case and garners the attention of everybody, whether he wants it or not, for he is now known as a man of integrity, much sought after by both sides of the colonial conflict. He turns down appointments offered him by both the crown and the Massachusetts assembly, disappointing all. He argues stubbornly that his priority should be to his practice and family.

Finally, something happens to stoke his passions—the Coercive Acts of 1774. The incredulity on his face grows by the second as he witnesses the chastisement of the king read as a proclamation in public. “Are we considered too young and unprincipled to understand justice?” he asks bitterly. Anger is sparked all over the thirteen colonies and the Continental Congress is formed in Philadelphia as a result. Now finally he agrees, at Samuel’s pleading, to serve as a Massachusetts delegate to the congress despite his nagging doubts whether the body has any legal authority.

The night before his acceptance speech, he hunches over his desk by the light of a single candle. We see the resolute anger in his eyes as he composes his text. Abigail comes downstairs to give him another candle, and then puts her hand on his head. John looks up and his mood breaks; a pensive look crosses his face, and he leans in to his wife. He appears to be near tears as the weight of his future overwhelms him. We feel

overwhelmed, too, because we already appreciate the enormity of what is about to transpire in American history. For me, this is the most emotional moment of an episode filled with them.

The following night, standing in the pulpit of a packed church, John Adams accepts his nomination. His first few words are softly spoken and unintelligible. Someone from the back yells out: “Speak up!” Adams shrugs and resets. In this moment he finds himself and his voice as patriot and leader—founding father. He clears his throat, and his remaining words are loud, clear, and cause his fellow citizens to erupt in standing ovation:

“. . . liberty will reign in America!”

She Said:

I agree with Eric that suspense builds through this entire segment, from the driving snare drums in the opening credits through the triumphant departure of the delegates from Massachusetts in the final scene. I was completely captivated by a story I thought I already knew.

I felt the chill of that lone rider in the first scene—the one who turns out to be John Adams. An odd sort of pride swelled up within me for the people who built this country. It is so easy to forget in 2008 that Massachusetts was once a remote English colony, and life for its inhabitants contained no small dose of toil, hardship, and anxiety for what the future might hold.

Maybe it’s a “female” thing, but I was equally captivated by the relationship between John and Abigail Adams. From the first time we see them look into each other’s eyes on the snowy street in front of their home,

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it's obvious their relationship is extraordinary. They convey volumes in a single look or touch or a twinkle in the eye.

John Adams is always soft with Abigail. They are intellectual and emotional equals, and they treat each other with the utmost respect. He interacts with his children in an entirely different manner. He comes across as a sort of lion who loves them fiercely and often tenderly, but if they get in the way while he is attending to business, he roars.

The menacing events of the Boston Massacre unwind around a family reunion and send John back out into the streets to help his neighbors. He witnesses death in what looks to be a very one-sided conflict, but John Adams is a man of integrity and reserves judgment. He is asked to defend the British captain and his men, and even though it is the unpopular choice, he knows it's the right thing to do. Abigail is not convinced he is making the right move, and she tells him so.

"He may be telling the truth," John Adams replies simply.

"All your clients tell the truth, John Adams," Abigail points out a bit sarcastically. "But your prospective client is the most despised man in Boston." Abigail goes on to suggest that it's ambition that leads John to take the case. He argues that counsel is the last thing a man should lack in a free country. Fact, evidence, and the law anchor John Adams to his choices. He yearns to prove his colony is governed by law.

Tensions run high throughout the trial. I found myself on the edge of my seat while John Adams implored witnesses to tell the truth and not succumb to fear of retaliation from the boisterous majority in the courtroom. Tears welled up in my eyes while I watched his sheer determination to do what is right. Again, I was sort of blindsided by a sense

of pride. I would like to think that determination is another building block of this country.

John collaborated with Abigail in all things, and one of my favorite scenes is when he paces around their four-poster bed while she quietly reads his closing argument. She starts her review with a compliment, and John is immediately suspicious.

“Abigail, you never charm me, so what you are about to say is cutting.”

He was not wrong. She sums up his speech with one word, “Vanity.” Then she goes on to state her honest opinion using words that demonstrate her own education and wit. “You have overburdened your argument with ostentatious erudition.” Abigail then softens her words and tells him that he doesn’t need to quote great men to prove he was one. She believes he can simply argue the truth, and people will believe him. John knows she is right and grudgingly spends the rest of the night rewriting his speech.

This scene is my favorite, not just because it shows the intimacy and intellectual vibrancy that makes John and Abigail such a unique couple, but also for purely theatrical reasons. The sparkling dialogue throughout this series is jaw-dropping, as are the beautifully filmed scenes, and this one in particular is a gem. There are really too many great chapters within Part One to mention within this article. The humanity and the emotional conflict on both sides of the line are poignantly exhibited in scene after scene.

Liberty is the core belief that finally propels John Adams to become a Massachusetts delegate to the first congress in Philadelphia. He knows the gathering is illegal—even treasonous—but he cannot abide the actions of

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the king. John Adams believes in his soul that liberty is an innate and essential right given by God, not granted to a select few by a king. Liberty must belong to everyone, no matter how lowly their birth.

I joined in John's fear when he whispered his misgivings to a proud Abigail after his acceptance speech—and I know how everything turns out! That is great storytelling. It is so easy to get wrapped up in this tale.

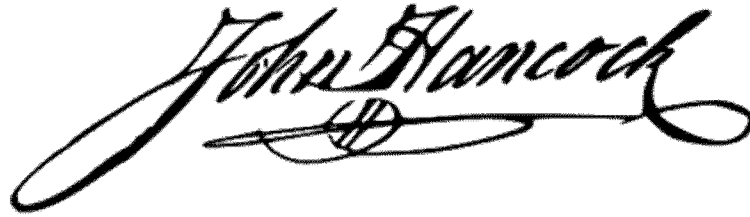
The final scene is simple and heartbreaking. John does not want to be torn from his family, and his children clasp hands to bolster each other up. They don't want to see him go. A pregnant Abigail is strong, but we sense her weariness and worry when she turns back into the house. The future of the country is uncertain, and she has to forge ahead without the help of her dearest friend.

Stay tuned.

[Next: Part Two – Independence](#)

PART TWO

Independence

A large, elegant cursive signature of John Hancock, written in black ink. The signature is highly stylized, with long, sweeping loops and a prominent 'H' that starts with a large, decorative flourish.

John Hancock's signature on the Declaration of Independence

He Said:

I never knew the founding fathers were so cool.

I grew up studying history in school thinking that those men were larger-than-life heroes and impossible to know on a personal level. Maybe those funny white wigs they wore and their high ideals about liberty and government made them seem unattainable to me. After viewing this second installment of the John Adams HBO miniseries, I feel like I know them better. They were brought down to my level as well as a made-for-TV movie can—they were human. They rocked.

One way the movie makes them seem real to me is the nonchalant way in which each player is introduced. A merchant marine steps off his ship at the Boston Harbor docks; we learn his name is John Hancock. The rascally man from Pennsylvania that can hardly be bothered to stand up and cast his votes in the Continental Congress is none other than Benjamin

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Franklin. The tall, gravely-voiced man dressed like a double-sized Napoleon is George Washington. The shy, tight-lipped man who refuses to speak up at the assembly is Thomas Jefferson.

Each time one of these characters first appears, you get a thrill when you realize who they are and what is in store for them during this heroic period of American history.

Another way the movie makes each hero accessible to me is the fact that they have flaws they must acknowledge and sometimes overcome to contribute to the birth of a country. John Adams himself was a hothead, with no patience for tact and diplomacy. In the opening scene of this segment, we see Adams cross-talking to John Dickenson as he makes a conciliatory speech to Congress. Mr. Dickenson stops to glare at Mr. Adams after every sentence. Hilarious.

Ben Franklin would have fit right in today's government quite well, I think. He understood the art of political double speak brilliantly. I never knew he was such a scamp. Witness this conversation between him and John Adams, when Adams sought out Franklin to vent his frustrations regarding the lack of progress in Congress:

Adams: "Do you not believe in saying what you think?"

Franklin: "Oh, I am very much against it."

Thomas Jefferson was my favorite character in this episode. He quietly absorbs all that goes around him but never speaks up. "I have no gift for oratory," he says. When he does speak, though, he does so passionately.

KELLY JO ELDREDGE

The first thing we hear him say concerns his "affection" for Philadelphia. "When will we escape this dreadful city?" Philadelphia: once, and always, the city of brotherly love.

Jefferson then drops a bombshell on John Adams by speaking his true mind regarding his anti-British sentiment: "I would gladly lend my hand to sink the whole island of Great Britain into the ocean." Adams is the king of the incredulous look, and the one he gives Jefferson after this invective is priceless. He remembers Jefferson's passion later, however, when he needs someone to draft a declaration of independence. Adams says he can't do it himself for the obvious reason that he is "obnoxious, suspected, and unpopular." At least he is honest and authentic.

A few weeks later we see Franklin, Adams, and Jefferson in Jefferson's study poring over the now-famous document in the climactic scene for me. Hearing those ageless words spoken for the first time was another big thrill: "We hold these truths to be sacred and undeniable." Sacred and undeniable?

Franklin speaks his mind this time, to Jefferson's chagrin. "These truths are self-evident, are they not?"

Thomas Jefferson, quietly seething, shrugs his hand in a barely perceptible movement and responds that each word was chosen with precision. Franklin fires back that every man in the congress will have a hand on the document. Adams could care less. He is thrilled that he finally has his instrument of defiance to wave under the king's nose. "I will defend every word of it," he says confidently.

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The flashpoint is over, and the three men agree to present the document to Congress. Benjamin Franklin then spins gleefully in his chair. “This really is a marvelous invention, Mr. Jefferson.”

“Yes, I went through several variations. This is by far the most successful.” I thought at first he was talking about the Declaration. He continued speaking, and I then realized he was talking about the chair that Dr. Franklin was spinning in. Yes, these are the founding fathers—heroes and ordinary men.

Soon the Declaration of Independence will be unleashed on the world, but first the historic vote on independence must take place in Congress. Before the vote, John Adams gets his chance to speak his mind to the assembly using his pent-up emotions, emboldened by the eloquent document before him.

“While I live, let me have a country. A free country!”

Amen.

She Said:

I think the founding mothers were rock stars, too.

I want to be like Abigail Adams when I grow up. Her strength, her honesty, her determination, and her wit shine through brilliantly in this segment. She represents the women who persevered during these times and held their families together no matter what they had to face. Women were equal partners in the fight for independence. They often don’t get much mention in the history books, but their story is front and center in this series.

KELLY JO ELDREDGE

The chapter opens with the familiar historical giants of the Continental Congress quarreling over whether or not to defy their mother country. They are considering a dangerous act of treason, and their debates are not mere words. They may be signing their own death warrants. What we see next is that the horrors faced at home during this time in our country's history were equally frightening.

In an early scene, Abigail is alone on the farm. John is in Philadelphia. It is the middle of the night, and she comforts her children when they hear enemy gunfire outside their window. They cling to her for courage, and she holds them throughout the night. Days later, she hands out water to the wounded soldiers straggling along the road in front of her house. I wondered what it must have been like for her to see Boston burning across the water and not have any idea when—or if—her husband would return from Philadelphia. She sees a face she recognizes in a cart filled with dead bodies that rolls past. The blood of war is on her doorstep. In yet another scene, we see her at the threshold with a rifle in her hands in the pouring rain. She will protect her family to the death, just like all the brave men fighting for liberty.

When John comes home again to visit, he relays the news of Congress. Abigail is annoyed and never afraid to speak her mind.

“Send a woman to the Congress,” Abigail says. “She might knock some sense into them.”

“This is not a question of men and women, Abigail. It is a matter of politics.”

“Politics? And do women not live politics, John Adams? When I go to the cupboard, and I find no coffee, no sugar, no pins, no meat . . . am I not living politics? This war touches people that your congress treats with the same contempt King George reserves for the people of Boston. I mean women, yes, and slaves, too, for that matter. Though, I am sure you wish that I not mention that subject, as it might upset your southern friends.”

She’s not messing around. She’s mad, she’s frightened, she’s cold, and she’s sick of men making all the decisions. I love this lady!

Abigail can’t take part in the decisions, but she can scrub the floors, make bullets, care for her children, and reassure John that she will manage. You see the frustration and determination in her eyes when she’s on her hands and knees with a bucket of cold water and a scrubbing stone. Her loneliness seeps from every part of her body as she wearily goes about her chores alone and takes a moment here and there to read a letter from John.

Another great scene is when George Washington pays Abigail a visit. She looks so meek and proper sitting across from him with her hands folded on her lap, but she lets General Washington have it. She asks this towering man, the head of the Continental Army and a southern slave owner, if their bleak situation might be God’s punishment for the sin of slavery. This woman was fearless—and quite ahead of her time!

In another gutsy move, Abigail asks a doctor to inoculate her family against smallpox. This was a painful and unproven method, and many died from the inoculation itself. It was a great risk, and she made the life-and-death decision on her own. The scene depicting their inoculation is

heartbreaking and reveals one example of the kind of literal pain that men, women, and children experienced in the colonies. Abigail goes first and grits her teeth but then smiles reassuringly at her children. Then, one by one, each child faces the knife while sitting on their mother's lap.

Nabby says, "What about Papa?"

"Papa is not here," Abigail replies. "We must depend on ourselves."

They all get sick from the inoculation, and Nabby nearly dies. Abigail presses on in an astonishing example of strength and nurses her child, almost defying death to take her from her arms. Nabby pulls through, and in a triumphant scene she reads a copy of the new Declaration of Independence with her mother and brothers who gather around her bed.

There were equal shares of sacrifice given throughout the colonies during these historic years. They came from men, women, and children. This segment is a wonderful example of how the founding fathers do not deserve all the glory.

[Next: Part Three – Don't Tread on Me](#)

PART THREE

Don't Tread on Me



John Quincy Adams

He Said:

Even before the opening credits of part three of the HBO John Adams miniseries, the viewer gets the feeling that the soaring triumph from Part II was short lived. This installment of the seven part movie plummets from the heights of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, seen in the previous episode, to the depths of John Adams' political failures as a European envoy during the latter stages of the Revolutionary War.

Abigail Adams and her husband, John, walk arm-in-arm along the snowy landscape of their Massachusetts farm. Abigail gushes that at long last John has returned to her after they endured years of separation during

his service to the Continental Congress. Just before the opening title sequence rolls we see John stare at his wife with a haunted, secretive look that foreshadows more sacrifice to come for her and her children as a result of John's service to our young country.

Abigail's subsequent heartbreak is hard to watch. She makes an impassioned case as to how much love and happiness John's separation from her has cost their family over the years. John is convinced; he decides to refuse his overseas assignment. Abigail does an about face, however. Not only does she tell her husband that he is the only man for the job, but he needs to take his son, John Quincy, with him. I found this one of the most fascinating aspects of this episode—to see how the future sixth president got his start in foreign policy. The cold, loveless farewell between Abigail and John doesn't bode well for what lies in store.

John Quincy becomes a renowned diplomat, but he didn't learn that skill from the second president, his father. John's stay in Paris is an unmitigated failure. The tactless, impatient country lawyer from Massachusetts cannot adapt to the subtle ways of French politics. He leaves in humiliation after a long period of frustration, estranged from Benjamin Franklin, his colleague in Paris, and the French people for whom he could find no empathy.

Meanwhile, back at home, Abigail's loneliness becomes acute when John's letters become less frequent and less affectionate. The most emotional scene in this episode is between Abigail and her daughter, Nabby, late one night. Nabby begs her mother to stop washing windows and come to bed. Abigail rails on her husband as fiercely as she wipes each pane of glass, as if she is trying to scrub John's conscience from 3,000 miles away. This seems like the big paradox of episode three: that John should

stop writing Abigail, his dearest, closest confidant, just because of political failure. Why could he not continue to affirm his love for her, when they both needed each other's support the most?

This part closes with John sick with a fever, sweating, coughing, and delirious in his apartment in Amsterdam. John Quincy has been shipped off to St. Petersburg to be the secretary for the United States ambassador there. So, he is quite alone, near death and estranged from all. He cannot even comprehend in his state that the war with Britain is over and America is free.

We know for a fact that this defeated, ill man recovers to become the first vice-president and the second president of the United States. But in this third episode we cannot see it, and the human frailty of this giant man in American history makes this melancholy installment the most paradoxically interesting episode, yet.

She Said:

One of the things I like best about this series is the way it reflects the family experience during a time in America's history that usually focuses on military victories and losses. Death in battle comes to mind first when we hear about sacrifices made during the Revolutionary War. This episode in particular takes a look at the personal sacrifices families made every day that were more subtle than life and death. One such sacrifice is laid out in the open in the snowy opening scene of Part III. Abigail says to John, "You realize, John, it has been fourteen years since we've been married. Not more than half of that time have we had the joy of living together. But you are here now, and you are safe."

Not so fast!

Abigail knows instinctively before John tells her that their ordeal is not over. He's not staying. John tells her in a heartbreaking scene as they lie side by side in bed that he has been sent to France to help Dr. Franklin.

"You cannot ask this of me. You cannot." Abigail whispers through her tears. John tries to explain, and she cuts him off. "You are needed here, John. Your children require your example. I need you here. Are you to add more years to those we already split apart? How can you give me back that time? How can you compensate to me all those years I cannot get back?"

John and Abigail continue to work through their decision in the darkness of their bedroom with choked sobs and tears streaming down their cheeks. The cost of freedom is dear. Finally, Abigail acknowledges that John must go where his country sends him. She admits if she were a man, she would also be in the field of action. "There all honor lies."

The goodbye scenes are difficult to watch in Part III. This is not the first time John has had to leave his family. They know what they're in for. Each one of them is very familiar with the loneliness, fear, and melancholy that come next. John's children cling to him, voice their anger, and finally console each other once again. And to increase the pain, John takes his oldest son, John Quincy, with him this time—at Abigail's request. As difficult as it will be to let her son go, she knows that it is time for him to develop his own sense of duty to his country.

Abigail bids her husband goodbye with a growl. "You come back to me, John," she says with a fierceness that is more of a threat than a term of endearment. She is obviously angry over their situation and helpless to do anything about it.

When John Adams and his son arrive in Paris after a frightening voyage, Franklin tells John that a treaty is all but finished. Adams is at first angry that he was not told before he braved the Atlantic in the winter, but he resolves to get to work on finalizing the details. Dr. Franklin tries to warn John that the French don't appreciate demands or expedition. "We are all actors here, Mr. Adams," Ben Franklin tells him. "And so far my performance has been well received." Franklin further tells Adams that he knows he is a good and moral man, which makes him exactly the wrong diplomat for Paris. "Paris requires a certain amount of indecency of thought and action." Franklin says with a twinkle in his eye.

Adams ends up insulting the French with his adamant push for more action. He is asked if he will attend the opera while in Paris, and he says rather boldly that he has no time. "I must study politics and war so that my sons will have the liberty to study mathematics and philosophy." Adams' work ethic does not impress the French, and he makes few friends in Paris.

Meanwhile, Abigail is holding down the fort at home. Her loneliness is apparent in a blue scene in the middle of the night, where she wanders from room to room and checks on each of her children. Her emptiness is not filled with letters from her "dearest friend." Instead, John's letters become more and more infrequent. The real reason he does not write seems to be that he is embarrassed by his failure in the French court. Abigail is deeply saddened by the infrequency of John's letters and the fact that when they do arrive, they do not give her any assurance that he loves her and has not forgotten them. "How can he not know what his silence costs me?" She says to her daughter as she stares out the window.

The scenes of Franklin living it up in France provide some comic relief to the loneliness that tears at the hearts of John and Abigail. Adams is

eventually asked to leave France, but he is not allowed to go home. He travels instead to Holland to ask for a loan and is not successful there, either. American credit is not well established, and the Dutch will lend money only to those who are capable of paying it back.

Duty first—before love, family, comfort...or health. Adams lies covered with sweat, alone and hallucinating as a result of a serious illness. He has recently sent John Quincy to Russia to "put his accomplishments to use in the service of his country." The family is now spread across the globe.

We feel the frustration of diplomatic decisions that plod along and put off the happy reunions of family members who love each other deeply. Our hearts twist when Abigail and John each receive news of the British surrender at separate times and worlds apart—Abigail hugs herself for comfort and then her children. It is unclear whether or not John even comprehends the news through his fever and hallucinations.

Duty first—but at what cost?