

**THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION AND
THE BOER WAR: AN OPEN LETTER TO
MR. CHARLES FRANCIS ADAMS ON
HIS PAMPHLET "THE CONFEDERACY
AND THE TRANSVAAL"**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649014699

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Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

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The American Revolution
and
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An Open Letter to
Mr. Charles Francis Adams
on his Pamphlet
"The Confederacy and the Transvaal"

By

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"The Evolution of the Constitution"
"The True Benjamin Franklin," etc.

(Reprinted from the *Philadelphia Sunday Times*
of January 19, 1902)

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PHILADELPHIA, January 14, 1902.

CHARLES FRANCIS ADAMS, ESQ.,
Boston, Massachusetts.

Dear Sir:

I have been handed a pamphlet written by you entitled "The Confederacy and the Transvaal," the burden of which is, that the Boers ought not to continue their irregular guerilla struggle against England, because it is destructive of themselves and wasteful of England's resources; or to use your own words "the contest drags wearily along, to the probable destruction of one of the combatants, to the great loss of the other, and, so far as can be seen, in utter disregard of the best interests of both."

You argue that the Boers, when their regular armies were defeated some considerable time ago, should have surrendered, given up the struggle, and not have resorted to a prolongation of the contest by guerilla methods. In support of this you cite the action of General Lee at the close of our civil war, when, his regularly organized army being completely defeated, he surrendered it, went quietly to his home and set an example, followed by the other southern leaders, of not prolonging the strife by those irregular methods which, as is well known, can be so very effective for a long period in a mountainous country like Switzerland or in a country of vast distances like the United States or South Africa.

In other words, you go so far as to say that when a people are fighting for their political integrity and independence, a hopeless struggle for it ought not to be prolonged beyond what may be called the point of scientific defeat. Rather than prolong it to desperation and death in the last ditch it is much better and more sensible to accept a dependent position of some sort, the position of a crown colony, or a charter colony with more or less varying degrees of colonial control, all of which your very unwise and altogether reckless great grandfather John Adams, and some of his friends used to describe as "political slavery."

This doctrine of the wrongfulness of a struggle for independence against overwhelming odds has appeared at times of late in the newspapers. I noticed that Mr. Bourke Cockran in his speech at the recent pro-Boer meeting in Chicago said, that the doctrine did not apply to the Boers because their heroism had now placed them in a position to win. He did not say positively whether or not he approved of such a doctrine. I am myself willing to pass by a great deal of approval of it. But when the attempt is made to render such an infamous doctrine respectable by affixing to it the honored name of Adams, a protest is in order from all those who are at all familiar with our own history.

I do not believe that our American people when their attention is really brought to the matter believe in any such doctrine. But their attention is not usually brought to it. We have been by our stupendous power far removed for a long time from the possibility of such a struggle. We are accustomed to the business method of settling serious disputes by yielding at once to overwhelming power; by acquiescing in the vote of the majority or the will of the richer man or clique that has bought up all the stock. When the political boss informs our corporation that the legislation we want passed must be paid for we pay without resorting to guerilla or any other tactics. When one holds the cards that will take all the remaining tricks he usually shows his hand saying, "the rest are mine," and everybody assents.

But circumstances alter cases and all cases are not alike. If your doctrine is of universal application the ravisher who presents himself with overwhelming force must always be gently accepted without resistance to save time and avoid danger and expense. If the European powers, disgusted with the success of our protective tariff and rising commercial supremacy, should unite to abolish our lynch law, burning of negroes at the stake, municipal corruption and some other matters, their armies and fleets would outnumber us even more than the English outnumber the Boers; and I suppose if you are really as much of a "quitter" as you profess to be you would then still preach your doctrine of submission.

When you look closely at the matter and try to fix the point of scientific defeat in the Boer war I do not know why you should place it at the fall of Pretoria or whatever moment you decide upon for the defeat of the regularly organized armies. I should say it was just as well placed before the fighting began when England showed her cards; a population of 30,000,000, without counting the population of the colonies, against a population that does not number 2,000,000 counting the Cape Colony rebels; an army of 250,000 regulars against 40,000 militia.

.. If your doctrine is sound political morality, it applied then, and in the face of such stupendous odds, I should say, rather more than it does now.

But I prefer to be guided somewhat in these matters by your great grandfather, John Adams, for whom I have always had a great fancy. If you will pardon me for saying so I think that his attention was more closely and intensely directed to these matters than yours has ever been. His neck was at stake as well as your own valuable existence and reputation. The British statute of that time provided a terrible punishment for what he was doing. Possibly you have never read it.

"That the offender be drawn to the gallows, and not be carried or walk; that he be hanged by the neck, and then cut down alive; that his entrails be taken and burnt while he is yet alive; that his head be cut off; that his body be divided into four parts; that his head and quarters be at the king's disposal."

The disposal the king was accustomed to make of the heads and quarters of such people was to have the quarters hung about in conspicuous parts of London like quarters of beef; and the heads were set up on poles on Temple Bar or London Bridge to rot as a ghastly warning.

I am inclined to think that the opinion of a man who from 1765 to 1780 worked with that enactment hanging over his head is worth considering. I find on picking up the first life of him that comes to hand, that he was anything but blind to the consequences. England had shown her hand. She outnumbered the colonists four to one; and, in the same proportion, she could send a disciplined army against their undisciplined militia and guerilla forces.

It was even worse than that. The colonists were not united in resisting England; not nearly so unanimous as the Boers are. It was by no means certain that our colonial rebel party had a bare majority. The loyalists insisted and believed that they themselves had the majority. So if we cut off from the supposed 3,000,000 population of the colonies the black slaves who numbered about 800,000 and the loyalists who were even more numerous, we had at the utmost only about 1,400,000 whites who were prepared to resist the army, fleet, and 8,000,000 population of England without counting nearly a million loyalists in their own midst.

In fact on the showing of hands it was an utterly hopeless contest, and within a few years proved itself to be such. All that saved your ancestor's party from complete annihilation was the assistance after 1778 of the French army, fleet, provisions, clothes and loans of money followed by assistance from Spain, and at the last moment by the alliance of Holland. And even with all this assistance your ancestor's cause was even as late as the year 1780 generally believed to be a hopeless one.

Your ancestor did not like the prospect. He was fully prepared for misery, beggary and his family blood attainted and rendered infamous to the last generation by the English law. Death was the least thing he dreaded.

"I go mourning in my heart all the day long," he writes to his wife, "though I say nothing. I am melancholy for the public and anxious for my family. As for myself a frock and trousers, a hoe and a spade would do for my remaining days."

"I feel unutterable anxiety," he writes again. "God grant us wisdom and fortitude! Should the opposition be suppressed, should this country submit, what infamy, what ruin, God forbid! Death in any form is less terrible."

"There is one ugly reflection," he says in a letter to Joseph Warren. "Brutus and Cassius were conquered and slain, Hampden died in the field, Sidney on the scaffold, Harrington in jail. This is cold comfort." (Morse's Adams, pp. 54, 60.)

Your ancestor had still other difficulties to face of which it may be well to remind you. Long before actual fighting began in our revolution the rebel party, or perhaps I should say, the rougher elements of it, created by means of

tar and feathers and other methods, a reign of terror throughout the whole country. They went about in parties taking weapons of all kinds out of loyalists' houses, although they have since put a clause in the National and all state constitutions that "the right to keep and bear arms shall never be infringed." Those documents also without exception, I believe, contain a clause guaranteeing freedom of speech and of the press; but the rebel party of your ancestor extinguished completely and utterly both of these rights; so completely that Rivington, the principal publisher of loyalist pamphlets, fled for his life to a British man-of-war; and loyalists scarcely dared refer to politics even indirectly in private letters.

If the loyalists were really a majority, as they professed to be, the rebels were determined to break them up. Loyalists were ridden and tossed on fence rails, gagged and bound for days at a time, stoned, fastened in rooms with a fire and the chimney stopped on top, advertised as public enemies so that they would be cut off from all dealings with their neighbors; they had bullets shot into their bedrooms, their horses poisoned or mutilated; money or valuable plate extorted from them to save them from violence and on pretence of taking security for their good behavior; their houses and ships were burnt; they were compelled to pay the guards who watched them in their houses; and when carted about for the mob to stare at and abuse they were compelled to pay something at every town. For the three months of July, August and September of the year 1774, one can find in the American Archives alone, over thirty descriptions of outrages of this kind.

In short, lynch law prevailed for many years during the revolution, and the habit became so fixed that we have never given it up. As has been recently shown the term lynch law originated during the revolution and was taken from the name of the brother of the man who founded Lynchburgh in Virginia.

The revolution was not by any means the pretty social event that the ladies of the so-called patriotic societies suppose it to have been. It was on the contrary a rank and

riotous rebellion against the long established authority of a nation which had saved us from France, built us up into prosperity and if she were ruling us to-day would, I am entirely willing to admit, abolish lynch law, negro burning, municipal and state legislative corruption and all the other evils about which reformers fret.

But feeling that we were a naturally separated people, the rebel party among us insisted that we had the inalienable right to rule ourselves. We were seized with the spirit of independence, or as the people of your way of thinking at that time called it "a chimera of patriotism." Against this natural and inalienable right no authority, we declared, no matter how meritorious and venerable need be respected.

The Boers, though receiving far greater provocation than we received, have behaved much better. They have not tarred and feathered Englishmen as we did or ridden them on rails, or suffocated them with smoke, or burnt their houses or hazed or tortured them in any way. Their conduct in the whole war has been most fair, honorable and meritorious, showing the high character of their intelligence and morals and their superiority to the British.

In our revolution, wherever the rebel party were most successful with their reign of terror they drove all the judges from the bench and abolished the courts; and for a long time there were no courts or public administration of the law in many of the colonies, notably in New England.

To people of the loyalist turn of mind all these lynching proceedings were an irrefragable proof, not only that the rebel party were wicked, but that their ideas of independence, of a country free from British control and British law, were ridiculous, silly delusions, dangerous to all good order and civilization. That such people could ever govern a country of their own and have in it that thing they were howling so much about, "liberty," was in their opinion beyond the bounds of intelligent belief.

These lynching proceedings, the loyalists said, increased the loyalist party very fast and made them sure of a majority. I shall not discuss that question. But there is no doubt that many rebels went over to the loyalist side; and