

The Lost Founding Father: John Quincy Adams and the Transformation of American Politics

Mark Cheatham

Cumberland University, mcheatham@cumberland.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Cheatham, Mark (2018) "The Lost Founding Father: John Quincy Adams and the Transformation of American Politics," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 20 : Iss. 2 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.20.2.07

Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol20/iss2/7>

Review

Cheatham, Mark R.

Spring 2018

Cooper, William J. *The Lost Founding Father: John Quincy Adams and the Transformation of American Politics*. Liveright, \$35.00 ISBN 9780871404350

While noted for his work on antebellum southern politics and the Civil War, retired historian William J. Cooper has written a biography of New Englander John Quincy Adams. While the choice of topic is surprising for someone with Cooper's scholarship, the result is not: a well-written, well-rounded look at the life of the sixth president whom many southerners considered their nemesis.

Cooper argues that Adams was "the lost founding father." His substantial career occurred during a period when the members of the founding generation—George Washington, Alexander Hamilton, and Thomas Jefferson—were deified and when more exciting personalities—John C. Calhoun, Henry Clay, and Andrew Jackson—overshadowed the reticent, introverted son of the second president (xi-xii). Adams also suffered, Cooper notes, because he was out of step with the changing political landscape that valued democratization over the elitist paternalism of his father's generation (xii-xiii).

The Lost Founding Father is divided into three sections. The first section focuses on Adams' life from birth until his assumption of the State Department in 1817. Living up to his father's reputation, even before John Adams succeeded Washington as president, proved difficult. The younger Adams possessed confidence, even vanity, but he was also driven by his parents' desire for his success (27). One positive by-product of his father's expectations was Adams' decision to follow his advice to keep a diary or journal. For most of his life, Adams recorded detailed notes about his day, a practice that gives historians rare insight into a politician's inner world (10-11, 14).

The second section examines Adams as secretary of state and president. Cooper clearly believes that Adams was a stronger head of the State Department than he was a chief executive. Adams' apex during this period was his authorship of the misnamed Monroe Doctrine, which articulated a powerful United States foreign policy in opposition to European encroachment (183-186). Adams found little success as president, however, despite outlining a vision that included "a centrally planned and managed system of internal improvements" (241). Time after time, on issue after issue, Adams acted passively. Having provided a vision, "his policy was to let Congress make its choices, and as president his duty was either to accept by signing or to reject by vetoing legislation sent to him" (243). Such inaction proved politically fatal when

facing the well-organized, passionate Jackson-Calhoun-Martin Van Buren coalition that sent Old Hickory to the President's Mansion in the 1828 election.

The final section addresses Adams' post-presidential career. Often rightfully regarded as an example of political rejuvenation, this period also witnessed disappointment. During the early 1830s, Adams failed to secure the Anti-Masonic presidential nomination and lost both a Massachusetts gubernatorial race and a likely Senate appointment (282, 284-285, 312). Not until the end of Jackson's second term did he begin to make his mark as a statesman, when Adams sided with antislavery colleagues in opposing the gag rule, which tabled antislavery petitions in the House. As part of the new Whig party that blossomed during Van Buren's administration, Adams began to change his reputation as a cold, aloof loser into a defender of the Union against the onslaught of the "slave power conspiracy."

In addition to providing a coherent examination of Adams' political career, Cooper also gives readers with a window into his non-political life, including his education, his religious beliefs, and his family interactions. He is able to present a comprehensive overview of Adams' life without becoming mired in too much detail, which is often the fatal weakness of these types of biographies. Having read and reviewed several books on John Quincy Adams in the past few years, I consider this one the best of the bunch.

Mark R. Cheatham is a professor of history at Cumberland University, where he also directs the Papers of Martin Van Buren. He is the author or editor of seven books, including The Coming of Democracy: Presidential Campaigning in the Age of Jackson. His email is mcheatham@cumberland.edu.