

Letters Between Abigail and John Adams

March 31, 1776 – May 7, 1776

The following exchange took place between Abigail Adams and her husband John while he was attending the Continental Congress in Philadelphia as a delegate from Massachusetts. Abigail and John corresponded often while he was away, and Abigail took this opportunity to remind her husband to “remember the ladies” while he was busy constructing a new government.

Abigail Adams to John Adams (Excerpt)

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 and indignity with impunity?

"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 (Excerpt)
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 intimation 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 latitude. 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 (Excerpt)
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."

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Questions:

1. What was Abigail asking her husband to consider in her first letter?
2. What “other” tribe is John Adams referring to in his response to Abigail?
3. Over whom does Abigail accuse her husband of trying to retain absolute power?

Answer Key

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1. What was Abigail asking her husband to consider in her first letter?
Abigail was asking her husband to consider expanding the rights of women in the new government.
2. What “other” tribe is John Adams referring to in his response to Abigail?
women
3. Who does Abigail accuse her husband of trying to retain absolute power over? What argument does she make to support this?
Abigail argues that if the purpose of the new government was to free subjected people, then why would the men seek to retain control over their wives by not granting them the same rights for which they were fighting?