

HOMAGE TO SAMUEL ADAMS

by Michael Ventura

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He didn't brew beer – that is, not enthusiastically and not for long. The successful brewer was his father, Samuel Sr., called Deacon for his passionate service to the Puritan church. Deacon Adams (1689-1748) was also a consummate politician., and like his friend Elisha Cooke, he had a “fixt enmity to all kingly government.” They led the Boston Caucus. “This club of small shopkeepers, mechanics and North End shipyard workers,” wrote John C. Miller in *Sam Adams: Pioneer in Propaganda*, “held a tight grip... Bostonians nominally decided their concerns in town meetings, but under Deacon Adams, and still more under his son and successor in leadership of the Caucus Club, the political bosses laid their plans and thoroughly cut and dried all the town's important business long before the citizens met in the town meeting – there usually to do as the Caucus bid,” but not quietly. Samuel wrote that “for form's sake a number of warm disputes” were staged during the meetings “to entertain the lower sort.”

(The idealists shudder. “Horrors, we owe our Revolution to corrupt backroom finaglers!”)

In 1743, 21 years old, Adams earned his Harvard degree arguing in the affirmative “whether it be lawful to resist the Supreme Magistrate, if the Commonwealth cannot be otherwise preserved?” In 1848 he co-founded a newspaper, *The Public Advertiser*. Its purpose, he wrote, was to “defend the rights and liberties” of those who “wear a worsted cap or leather apron” – working folk. So began decades of writing in a constant agitation for liberty. If facts served the cause, Adams was pleased to report facts; if not, slander would do. His basic political tactic was pure Karl Rove. As Samuel said, “Put your adversary in the wrong and keep him there.” (“Horrors, we owe our Revolution to dirty-tricks politics!”)

Until his early 40s, Samuel Adams seemed, in the eyes of many, to make a career of failing. He was a poor tax collector because he didn't press those who couldn't pay. After his father's death his distracted management drove the brewery into bankruptcy. Biographers call him “penniless,” “almost penniless,” “virtually penniless.” He let his financial affairs slide because he spent his days conversing and conniving and spent his nights writing. More than one historian has called him America's first full-time politician. What he liked best was to meet with the Boston Caucus at Tom Dawes' house on Purchase Street, where they drank beer, discussed, plotted, and, as one witness wrote, smoked “till you cannot see from one end of the garret to the other.” (“Horror of horrors, we owe our Revolution to *smokers!*”)

In fact, alone among our more famous Founders, Samuel Adams owned no lands and had no money. As his younger cousin John Adams wrote, “For fifty years his pen, his tongue, his activity, were constantly exerted for his country without fee or reward.” Even in his lifetime he was called “the last Puritan.” Proud of his poverty, “from youth to old age he preached the necessity of returning to an earlier and simpler way of life: his first revolt was against materialism and his first hatreds were against those whom he believed hostile to the rebirth of [Puritanism]... Puritanism was his goal: revolution was his method of attaining it” (Miller). Wrote Samuel Adams, “It is in the Interests of Tyrants to reduce the People to Ignorance and Vice. For they [tyrants] cannot live in any Country where Virtue and Knowledge prevail.”

Lying was a vice, but lying for the cause was a virtue. (Not for nothing has Adams been called “the Lenin of our Revolution.”) During the British occupation of Boston “his lurid descriptions of imaginary rapes, quarrels and insults led to real bloodshed... for both soldiers and civilians had been convinced by Adams' propaganda that they were in danger of massacre from their enemies” (Miller). The result: A deadly street fight Adams himself dubbed “the Boston Massacre,” which he in turn publicized to galvanize resistance against the British. Cousin John put it this way: That event was “an explosion which had been intentionally wrought up by designing men [Samuel], who knew what they were aiming at better than the instruments [rioters] employed.”

I've not the space to detail Samuel Adams' careful cultivation of what we might call "the gangs of Boston" into an extraordinarily disciplined corps of storm troopers, ready to riot at his instruction. Though they tarred-and-feathered (painful torture) a few, they didn't seriously injure or kill anyone. Still, gangs of men under Adams' direction ransacked Tory houses and terrorized Tory families, while gangs of boys broke the windows of Tory-leaning shops and defaced their signs with feces. ("Horrors, we owe our revolution to *terrorists!*" We sure do. Get the details in the vividly well-written *Patriots: The Men Who Started the American Revolution*, by A.J. Langguth. One historian's terrorist is another historian's patriot.) Before condemning what was certainly terrorism, remember Samuel Adams and his co-conspirators were leading "mechanics" (craftspeople), unskilled laborers, and farmers against Britain's army and navy, the greatest in the world at the time. To fight fair was to lose.

A terrorist, of a kind -- yet Samuel Adams is the man of whom Thomas Jefferson wrote, "If there was any Palinurus [helmsman] to the Revolution, Samuel Adams was the man."

Mark Puls, *Samuel Adams: Father of the American Revolution*: in 1764 Samuel wrote "the first public document to question Parliament's... authority in America, [and he was] the first to call for the colonies to unite in protest in a congress." The stroke of genius, the act that did the most to unite the colonies and ripen them for revolution, was Samuel Adams' creation of "committees of correspondence." Under Adams' leadership, through the 1760s and early 1770s Boston led resistance against the British, but Boston could not stand alone. Adams' "committees of correspondence" quickly developed into a colonies-wide network of communication that was extraordinarily rapid for its day -- their Internet. It had shocking results. For instance, the Boston Tea Party (Adams' crowning achievement as a rioter) was quickly duplicated in New York and up and down the Eastern seaboard. Puhs demonstrates how Samuel Adams in 1771, through the committees and newspapers, wrote "a series of articles, most more than 3,500 words, [explaining] the fundamentals of self-government, theories on natural rights and law, [and] the separation of powers. He quoted the Magna Carta... explained John Lock, Montesquieu, and David Hume... [and] provided a historical analysis of slavery and how leaders tended to subjugate free people... Nothing like his essays had ever appeared in America. By telling a distinctly American story of what he called 'the American cause of freedom', he wanted to foster a national identity in the minds of the colonists." Wrote Adams: "The liberties of our country are worth defending at all hazards. If we should suffer them to be wrested from us, millions yet unborn may be the miserable sharers in the event."

His articles were reprinted everywhere and discussed hotly in taverns and churches. They gave Americans a vocabulary both for revolution and for the building of a republic. They were the culmination of Adams' writings, though as early as 1765, responding against the Stamp Act, he'd written widely circulated words that Jefferson would echo in the Declaration: Americans were "unalienably entitled to those essential rights in common with all men: and that no society can, consistent with the law of God and nature, divest them of those rights."

This tells the man: When he married his second wife, her family made her the gift of a young slave girl to help with chores. Samuel Adams said, "A slave cannot live in my house. If she comes, she must be free." He saw to it that the girl, Surry, was legally freed.

At the Continental Congress younger men -- Jefferson, cousin John, George Washington -- took the lead, though Samuel Adams was crucial in placing Virginia's Washington at the head of the new United States Army, thus (temporarily) uniting North and South. Victory achieved, the aging Samuel Adams wasn't pleased with the Federalist's Constitution. It gave too much power to a central governmental authority. He signed on only after he and John Hancock exacted the promise of a "Bill of Rights" to guarantee liberties to the people and the states. (Thank you, thank you, Samuel Adams Thank you, thank you, John Hancock..)

He died in 1803, and he didn't die happy. He'd wanted America to be a "Christian Sparta." Instead, by 1800, he saw us "prostituting our glory as a people for new modes of pleasure ruinous

in their expenses, injurious to virtue, and totally detrimental to the well being of society.” Shortly before his death he wondered, “Will men never be free?”

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