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# **John Quincy Adams On Immigration**

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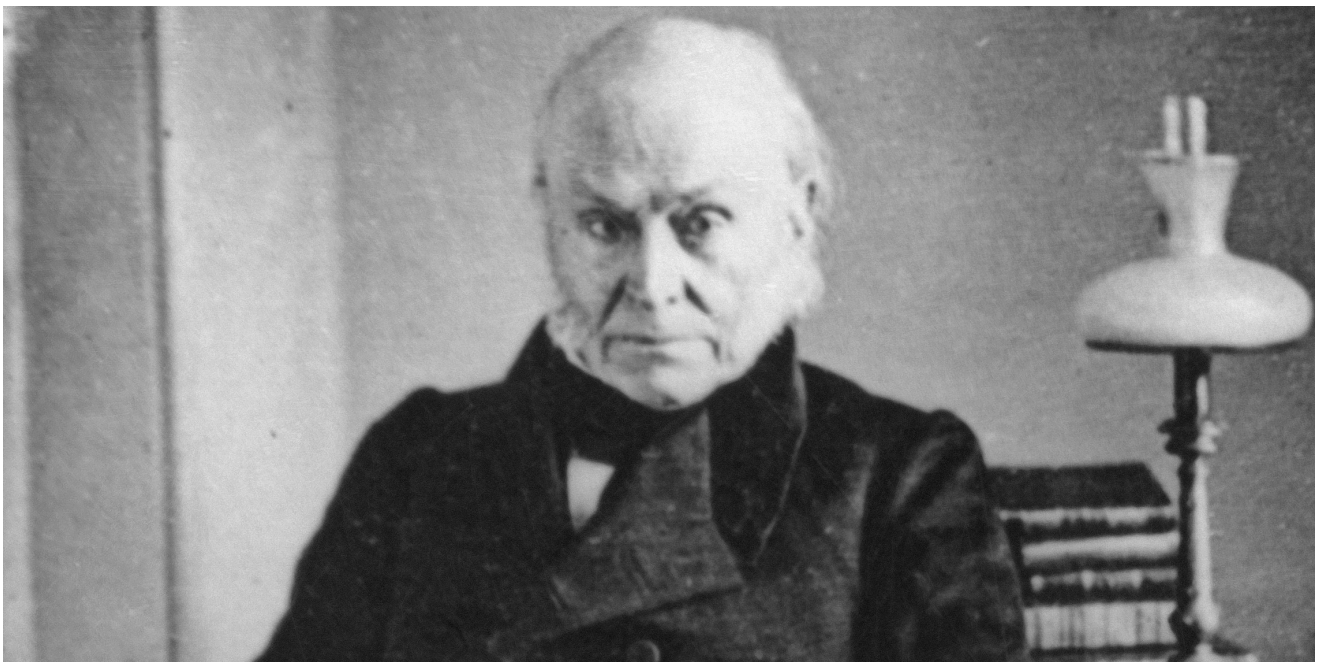
## Introduction

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As an avid daily reader of a wide variety of subjects across an even wider variety of sources, I sometimes run across a historic piece that not only still holds a very practical application today, but also is so insightful, I feel I have no option but to share it with as wide an audience as possible. And whether or not you agree with the position of the piece and its content in relation to your own position on its topic, the piece itself is definitely worth the read.

One such historical item is a letter penned in 1819 by then-Secretary of State and future-President John Quincy Adams as a response to a letter he received from a German official named Moritz von Fürstenwärther who was asking that he be provided a job by the fledgling U.S. government should he choose to emigrate to the U.S.

Adams's response to this inquiry provides great insight into his view on immigration, which clearly states immigrants who arrived in the U.S. during this time were provided the same exact opportunity as every other immigrant... the equal chance to make it on their own. As you read this letter from Adams as it was written, as well as my interpretation of its meaning, keep in mind that while there were churches and private charities already well established in the new country, there were absolutely no government handouts available to the immigrants of the day.



John Quincy Adams, 1843

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Sir—I had the honor of receiving your letter of the 22nd April, enclosing one from your kinsman, the Baron de Gagern, and a copy of your printed report, which I hope and have no doubt will be useful to those of your countrymen in Germany, who may have entertained erroneous ideas, with regard to the results of emigration from Europe to this country.

The United States 'has never held out any incitements to induce the subjects of any other sovereign to abandon their own country, to become inhabitants of this.'

It was explicitly stated to you, and your report has taken just notice of the statement, that the government of the United States has never adopted any measure to encourage or invite emigrants from any part of Europe. It has never held out any incitements to induce the subjects of any other sovereign to abandon their own country, to become inhabitants of this. From motives of humanity it has occasionally furnished facilities to emigrants who, having arrived here with views of forming settlements, have specially needed such assistance to carry them into effect. Neither the general government of the union, nor those of the individual states, are ignorant or unobservant of the additional strength and wealth, which accrues to the nation, by the accession of a mass of healthy, industrious, and frugal laborers, nor are they in any manner insensible to the great benefits which this country has derived, and continues to derive, from the influx of such adoptive children from Germany.

But there is one principle which pervades all the institutions of this country, and which must always operate as an obstacle to the granting of favors to new comers. This is a land, not of privileges, but of equal rights. Privileges are granted by European sovereigns to particular classes of individuals, for purposes of general policy; but the general impression here is that privileges granted to one denomination of people, can very seldom be discriminated from erosions of the rights of others.

Emigrants from Germany, therefore, or from elsewhere, coming here, are not to expect favors from the governments. They are to expect, if they choose to become citizens, equal rights with those of the natives of the country. They are to expect, if affluent, to possess the means of making their property productive, with moderation, and with safety;—if indigent, but industrious, honest and

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frugal, the means of obtaining easy and comfortable subsistence for themselves and their families.

Immigrants 'come to a life of independence, but to a life of labor..'

They come to a life of independence, but to a life of labor—and, if they cannot accommodate themselves to the character, moral, political, and physical, of this country, with all its compensating balances of good and evil, the Atlantic is always open to them, to return to the land of their nativity and their fathers.

To one thing they must make up their minds, or, they will be disappointed in every expectation of happiness as Americans. They must cast off the European skin, never to resume it. They must look forward to their posterity, rather than backward to their ancestors; they must be sure that whatever their own feelings may be, those of their children will cling to the prejudices of this country, and will partake of that proud spirit, not unmingled with disdain, which you have observed is remarkable in the general character of this people, and as perhaps belonging peculiarly to those of German descent, born in this country.

That feeling of superiority over other nations which you have noticed, and which has been so offensive to other strangers, who have visited these shores, arises from the consciousness of every individual that, as a member of society, no man in the country is above him; and, exulting in this sentiment, he looks down upon those nations where the mass of the people feel themselves the inferiors of privileged classes, and where men are high or low, according to the accidents of their birth.

'No government in the world possesses so few means of bestowing favors, as the government of the United States.'

But hence it is that no government in the world possesses so few means of bestowing favors, as the government of the United States. The governments are the servants of the people, and are so considered by the people, who place and displace them at their pleasure. They are chosen to manage for short periods the common concerns, and when they cease to give satisfaction, they cease to be employed. If the powers, however, of the government to do good are restricted, those of doing harm are still more limited. The dependence, in affairs

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of government, is the reverse of the practice in Europe, instead of the people depending upon their rulers, the rulers, as such, are always dependent upon the good will of the people.

We understand perfectly, that of the multitude of foreigners who yearly flock to our shores, to take up here their abode, none come from affection or regard to a land to which they are total strangers, and with the very language of which, those of them who are Germans are generally unacquainted. We know that they come with views, not to our benefit, but to their own—not to promote our welfare, but to better their own condition.

We expect therefore very few, if any transplanted countrymen from classes of people who enjoy happiness, ease, or even comfort, in their native climes. The happy and contented remain at home, and it requires an impulse, at least as keen as that of urgent want, to drive a man from the soil of his nativity and the land of his father's sepulchres. Of the very few emigrants of more fortunate classes, who ever make the attempt of settling in this country, a principal proportion sicken at the strangeness of our manners, and after a residence, more or less protracted, return to the countries whence they came.

'The multitude of foreigners who yearly flock to our shores, to take up here their abode, none come from affection or regard to a land to which they are total strangers.'

There are, doubtless, exceptions, and among the most opulent and the most distinguished of our citizens, we are happy to number individuals who might have enjoyed or acquired wealth and consideration, without resorting to a new country and another hemisphere. We should take great satisfaction in finding you included in this number, if it should suit your own inclinations, and the prospects of your future life, upon your calculations of your own interests.

I regret that it is not in my power to add the inducement which you might perceive in the situation of an officer under the government. All the places in the department to which I belong, allowed by the laws, are filled, nor is there a prospect of an early vacancy in any of them. Whenever such vacancies occur, the applications from natives of the country to fill them, are far more numerous than the offices, and the recommendations in behalf of the candidates so strong and



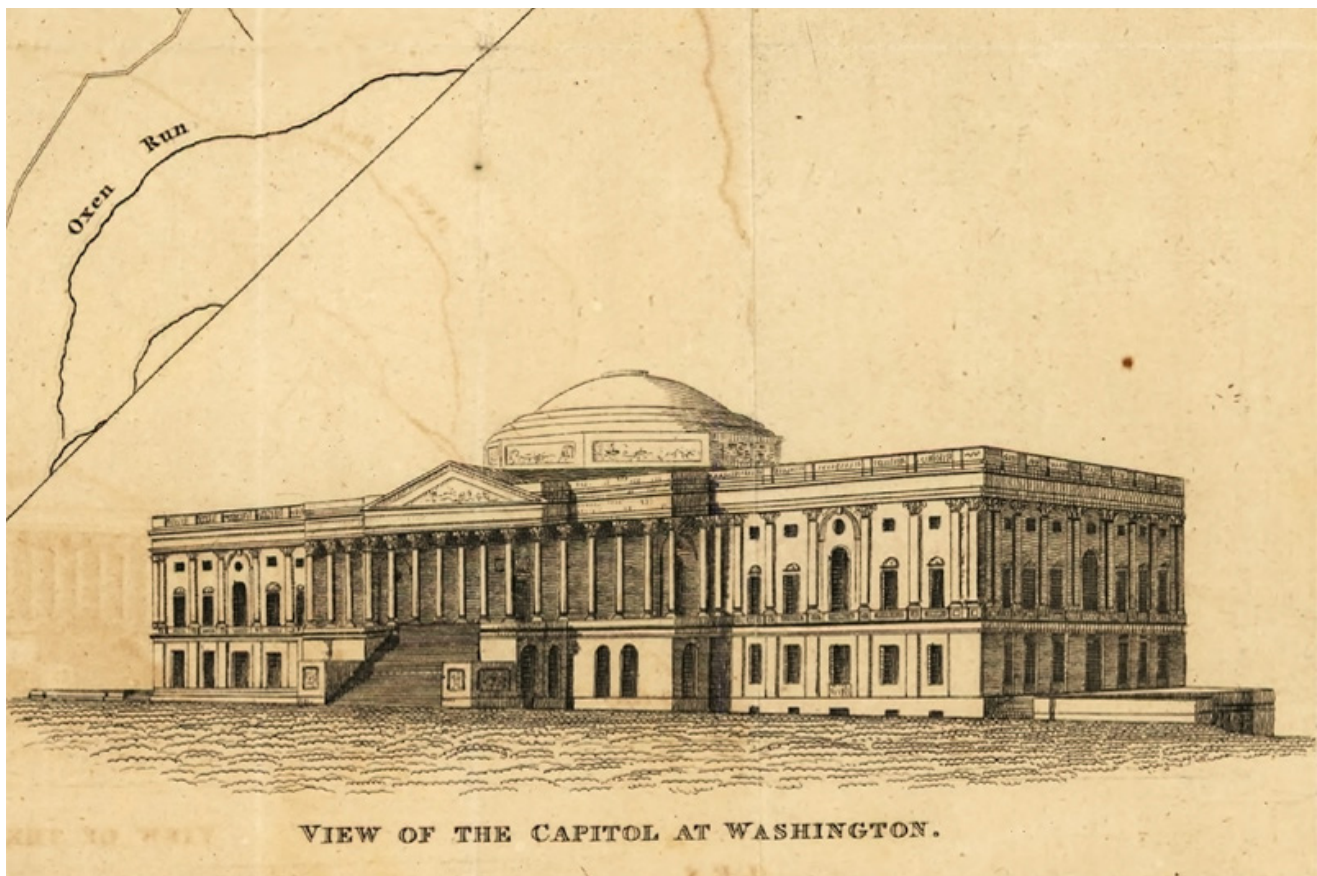
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so earnest, that it would seldom be possible, if it would ever be just, to give a preference over them to foreigners.

Although, therefore, it would give me a sincere pleasure to consider you as one of our future and permanent fellow citizens, I should not do either an act of kindness or of justice to you, in dissuading you from the offers of employment and of honorable services, to which you are called in your native country. With the sincerest wish that you may find them equal and superior to every expectation of advantage that you have formed, or can indulge, in looking to them, I have the honor to be, sir, your very obedient and humble servant,

John Quincy Adams



Drawing of U.S. Capitol, 1819

## Interpreting Adams's Words In Today's Terms

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From reading John Quincy Adams's letter, we can see that this German official is quite accustomed to his station granting him instant access to society, and to employment. We can also see that right off the bat, Adams explains that any member of German society who thinks their station will sway favor with the American government, and the average American, has an "erroneous" idea about America.

Adams says plainly that the United States "has never held out any incitements to induce the subjects of any other sovereign to abandon their own country, to become inhabitants of this." You can not only hear Adams saying the relatively new nation does not invite the subjects of European monarchies to join the ranks of U.S. citizens, but read into the statement that the concept of station has no place in American society.

Adams immediately moves on to state that while there have been occasions where certain "facilities" have been "furnished" to immigrants desiring to form new settlements, both the federal and state governments who have done so have only provided this assistance when it was felt the new settlement would add "strength and wealth...by the accession of a mass of healthy, industrious, and frugal laborers." It is as if you can hear Adams stating that the new nation is far more receptive to people who are planning on coming to the United States to roll up their sleeves and create industry, as opposed to the perceived lifestyle the German official is expecting to experience.

Adams goes on to state, however, that despite the offering of assistance to new settlers intent on labor and hard work, "there is one principle which pervades all the institutes of this country" and operates "as an obstacle to the granting of favors to new comers", and it is that the United States "is a land, not of privileges, but of equal rights." Adams then retorts, while "privileges are granted by European sovereigns to particular classes of individuals" as a "general policy", in the United States, "the general impression" is "that privileges granted to one denomination of people, can very seldom be discriminated from erosions of the rights of others."

Let's pause here for a second because this is such a predominant issue in American politics today. Adams is saying that to bestow certain rights upon new immigrants at a cost to the government simply because they have arrived

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would, in turn, erode the rights, or resources, of the existing citizenry. It is apparent Adams agrees with the notion that taking from the citizenry to provide privileges to new immigrants is unfair and unjust. You can gleam from the entire first passage of the letter that Adams believes immigrants should come to the United States ready to roll up their sleeves and get to work, and not come with the notion that they are entitled to assistance from the government or its citizens. What's more, Adams believes that an immigrant arriving and being granted certain privileges can only obtain those privileges at an unjust expense to others.

There is further proof of Adams's belief in the next passage when he states that immigrants "coming here, are not to expect favors from the governments," referring to government at any level within the United States. Adams then goes on to say that immigrants are to expect "equal rights with those of the natives of the country". Adams states that new affluent immigrants can expect "to possess the means of making their property productive with moderation, and with safety", and immigrants that are "indigent, but industrious, honest and frugal" can expect "the means of obtaining easy and comfortable subsistence for themselves and their families."

Adams drives his point home with the statement that "immigrants come to a life of independence, but a life of labor-and, if they cannot accommodate themselves to the character, moral, political, and physical, of this country, with all its compensating balances of good and evil, the Atlantic is always open to them, to return to the land of their nativity and their fathers."

I believe this drives home a point that is highly critical in American politics today. Anyone who expunges the notion that any recent immigrant who is displeased with the life they find here in America once arriving should "return to the land of their nativity and their fathers" is immediately called racist and xenophobic, but in the context provided by Adams, I argue this notion is just and still applicable today. Any recent immigrant who is displeased with what they find here and the privileges that American society provides, despite them being far too generous, in my opinion, should promptly return to the land they left.

The next part of Adams's letter addresses his belief that immigrants should whole-heartedly embrace their new home, and not pine for the land they left,



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and that furthermore, they should instill in their children the belief that the United States is their home and native land. Read this passage carefully as it is so applicable to the issue of immigration in the U.S. today.

Adams states: "To one thing they must make up their minds, or, they will be disappointed in every expectation of happiness as Americans. They must cast off the European skin, never to resume it."

Let's talk about the insight Adams offers in those first two sentences. He is stating that new immigrants must cast off their ties, beliefs and way of life from their previous country, which he calls their "European skin", and fully embrace their new life as Americans, "or they will be disappointed in every expectation of happiness as Americans."

I must pause here and thank the people that raised me. For you see, I was raised as an American. Not as a Something-American, but just as an American. I was made aware of my ancestry and my roots, but above all else, I was raised as an American – a fourth-generation natural born citizen who speaks the nation's language, respects the nation's laws, and admires its system of government, even if it now works far better in theory than in practice.

I believe the people who raised me, much like Adams, had the foresight and understanding that attempting to be loyal to two lands, to two countries, only results in a person not being happy with either. It results in the person not seeing the true benefit and wonder of the land in which they live, but instead, continually, miserably, straddling two sides. Loyalties are torn and instead of concentrating on their own lives, their own prosperity, their own direction, citizens who are the children of immigrants that weigh them down with loyalties to the old country carry a ball and chain around their ankle that keeps them from achieving their true potential as Americans. This old country guilt serves no purpose other than to hold them back and to keep them from integrating into the fabric of American society. Ironically, those who point first to their heritage as the source of their lack of success in this country are completely correct, but not because that heritage is exploited by Americans, but because they burden themselves with that heritage all on their own.

Adams goes on to state: "They must look forward to their posterity, rather than

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backward to their ancestors; they must be sure that whatever their own feelings may be, those of their children will cling to the prejudices of this country, and will partake of that proud spirit, not unmingled with disdain, which you have observed is remarkable in the general character of this people". This statement is further proof that Adams shares the belief that loyalties to the old country can only serve as a weight around the necks of the U.S.-born children of immigrants who do not raise them to be 100% Americans, but instead, metaphorical dual-citizens of the country in which they were born and the country in which their parents or grandparents were born.

I have long said, and still believe, that so many of the challenges children of immigrants face today are imposed by their parents' inexcusable desire to raise them as Something-Americans instead of just Americans. Naturally, these parents blame these challenges on racism instead of where the blame belongs, on their lack of foresight in raising their children to solely be a part of American society.

After driving home the idea that any immigrant to the United States should embrace their new home and leave their ties to their old country behind, Adams then reiterates his position that the German official will run into missed expectations should he emigrate to the United States with the notion of superiority or privilege by birth, especially from the everyday U.S. citizen. Adams states: "That feeling of superiority over other nations which you have noticed, and which has been so offensive to other strangers, who have visited these shores, arises from the consciousness of every individual that, as a member of society, no man in the country is above him; and, exulting in this sentiment, he looks down upon those nations where the mass of the people feel themselves the inferiors of privileged classes, and where men are high or low, according to the accidents of their birth."

Adams continues by stating that due to the consciousness of individuals in the United States that "no man in the country is above him", "no government in the world possesses so few means of bestowing favors, as the government of the United States." Adams then goes on to state that in addition to not being in a position to bestow favors as a government entity, even the politicians that make up the government are bound by the people that elected them to not bestow such favors either.

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"The governments are the servants of the people, and are so considered by the people, who place and displace them at their pleasure. They are chosen to manage for short periods the common concerns, and when they cease to give satisfaction, they cease to be employed. If the powers, however, of the government to do good are restricted, those of doing harm are still more limited. The dependence, in affairs of government, is the reverse of the practice in Europe, instead of the people depending upon their rulers, the rulers, as such, are always dependent upon the good will of the people."

It is then that Adams goes on to explain it is his understanding "that of the multitude of foreigners who yearly flock to our shores, to take up here their abode, none come from affection or regard to a land to which they are total strangers, and with the very language of which, those of them who are Germans are generally unacquainted. We know that they come with views, not to our benefit, but to their own—not to promote our welfare, but to better their own condition." In other words, Adams is once again driving home the fact that when Europeans, especially those from Germany, make their trek across the Atlantic, they are doing so to get away from the practices of privilege and station the German official has sought from the United States government via his inquiry to John Quincy Adams.

Adams then goes on to present his view that it is the less well off citizens of Europe who tend to find America appealing, and not people of station like the German official who may find disappointment in certain comforts that America does not have to offer. "We expect therefore very few, if any transplanted countrymen from classes of people who enjoy happiness, ease, or even comfort, in their native climes. The happy and contented remain at home, and it requires an impulse, at least as keen as that of urgent want, to drive a man from the soil of his nativity and the land of his father's sepulchres." Adams then goes on to report, perhaps in an attempt to completely dissuade the German official from even attempting to come to America, by stating, "Of the very few emigrants of more fortunate classes, who ever make the attempt of settling in this country, a principal proportion sicken at the strangeness of our manners, and after a residence, more or less protracted, return to the countries whence they came."

Having fully pled his case to the official, Adams back tracks just slightly, almost as if he is attempting to not be too harsh while still continuing to drive home the fact that immigrants to America should expect to be ready to make their

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own way. "There are, doubtless, exceptions, and among the most opulent and the most distinguished of our citizens, we are happy to number individuals who might have enjoyed or acquired wealth and consideration, without resorting to a new country and another hemisphere. We should take great satisfaction in finding you included in this number, if it should suit your own inclinations, and the prospects of your future life, upon your calculations of your own interests." It seems Adams just wants to state one more time that anyone moving to America should be ready to rely solely upon their "own interests."

It is then that Adams finally directly addresses the official's request for a position within the United States government, should he emigrate to America. "I regret that it is not in my power to add the inducement which you might perceive in the situation of an officer under the government. All the places in the department to which I belong, allowed by the laws, are filled, nor is there a prospect of an early vacancy in any of them."

Having clearly stated the answer to the official's inquiry is "no", Adams then goes on to state something that definitely resonates with me, and is a topic of heated discussion in America today. "Whenever such vacancies occur, the applications from natives of the country to fill them, are far more numerous than the offices, and the recommendations in behalf of the candidates so strong and so earnest, that it would seldom be possible, if it would ever be just, to give a preference over them to foreigners."

Just like those today who talk of putting America and Americans first – putting the needs of citizens above the needs of non-citizens – Adams rightly states that it would be unjust to all of the American citizens seeking a role in the government should that role be provided to "foreigners" instead. I know there are a number of people out there who would like anyone reading Adams's words, or the words of any modern politico making the same point, to immediately relegate the use of the word "foreigner" and providing something to citizens first as being seeded in racism or xenophobia, but I would argue this is not the case, especially for me.

For you see, in my case, I believe that a U.S. citizen, regardless of birthplace, regardless of skin color, regardless of religion, and regardless of heritage should be considered for any position, private or public, within the United States, before

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someone who is not a citizen, also regardless of that person's skin color, religion, or heritage. Any post should not be offered to a non-citizen until it has been proven that there is not a citizen who can do that job. I believe the job should be awarded on education, ability and work ethic, first among citizens, and if none available, then to a non-citizen. And such non-citizen should be required to pay all of the same taxes on their income from that job for which a citizen would be responsible. I also believe that we should all be paying the same amount of tax by percentage, but that's another argument for another time.

Lastly, Adams closes with a summary in which he states, although it would give him "a sincere pleasure to consider you as one of our future and permanent fellow citizens," he feels the German official should not be dissuaded from "the offer of employment and of honorable services" to which the official may be called to in his native country.

Adams then ends the letter with a little tongue-in-cheek comment: "With the sincerest wish that you may find them equal and superior to every expectation of advantage that you have formed, or can indulge, in looking to them, I have the honor to be, sir, your very obedient and humble servant". Adams clearly is mocking the expectation of privilege and advantage the official expects, but reminds the man to look to those privileges in his native land because he will not find the same privileges in America. Adams's final sentiment is classic irony. After explaining to the official throughout the letter that he should not expect anyone to bow and provide him with the privilege he experiences in his native land, Adams offers himself up figuratively as the official's "obedient and humble servant."

We see in this letter from Adams as a response to the German official seeking privilege from the government and over its citizens, more than a few concepts that are still very applicable to the immigration questions facing America today. There are so many lessons in history – paths that have already been walked – and we are remiss to not revisit these paths as we cut our own paths moving forward in time.

I agree whole-heartedly with Adams that we need to put the needs and welfare of existing Americans first, before we invite others to come and join the party. And, as comedian Dennis Miller once so wisely put it, "We don't mind you joining



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the party, all we ask is that you sign the guestbook so we know who is here." Signing the guestbook allows us to know who is contributing and who is taking, who is producing and being productive, and who is not doing their part.



Birthplace of John Quincy Adams. Photo by Daderot via Wikipedia.

William L. Savastano is a business professional and two time Society for Technical Communication Award Winner with over two decades of experience in the corporate arena. William trained extensively in advertising and marketing copywriting, technical writing, journalism, and both print and electronic publishing. William's body of work includes a large volume of marketing content, collateral materials, websites, operating manuals, technical manuals, as well as inclusion in national publications and a number of published poems and short stories.