Adams and Liberty

Most popular song on “To Anacreon” melody before Key’s Banner
1798

Words by Thomas Paine
Music by John Stafford Smith

(Bb Major • Medium Voice)
Edited by Mark Clogue and Andrew Kuster
Adams and Liberty, 1798
Lyric by Thomas Paine (1773–1811); Music by John Stafford Smith (1750–1836)

Historical Note
Often referred to as America’s first presidential campaign song, “Adams and Liberty” was rather inspired by the so-called “XYZ Affair” and the subsequent undeclared Quasi-War (1798–1800) between the U.S. and France. Attempting to remain neutral in the war between Britain and France, U.S. diplomatic relations with its former ally deteriorated after a U.S. trade deal with London and a refusal to pay off debts owed to the (former) French king. French privateers began seizing American ships. As a result, the U.S. Congress revitalized the Navy, passed the regressive Alien and Sedition Acts, and on July 7, 1798 rescinded its treaties with France. Only President John Adams’s lonely and controversial refusal to declare war kept the nation from overt military action. The song thus serves as a Federalist Party anthem in support of a beleaguered leader.

Poet and editor Thomas Paine (1773–1811) was the son of lawyer and signer of the Declaration of Independence Robert Treat Paine. Commissioned by the Massachusetts Charitable Fire Society, he wrote nine verses to the tune of “The Anacreontic Song.” The resulting 1798 publication of the soon popular song was the first U.S. imprint to offer musical notation of the melody that would become the national anthem. The melody and accompaniment here are already variants from the original. Most charming is a new active accompaniment that carries the music’s momentum through a rather long text. The tune’s English origins may represent another rhetorical layer for America’s pro-British Federalist party, of which Francis Scott Key was a member.

Title and text seem to invoke the young nation’s first patriotic anthem—John Dickinson’s 1768 “Liberty Song”—by calling on the “Sons of Columbia” to recognize the peace and prosperity brought by the 1776 Revolution and with the chorus’ vow that never again would they be slaves to another nation. Here, of course, Paine was not calling for freedom for the New World’s African slaves, rather, that the white male elite of the nation would not be subjugated to colonial rule.

Verses that follow parallel contemporary events, to suggest that commerce should not be used as a means of war and that faction (partisanship) must not threaten the nation. Verse 4 makes rather clever use of two meanings of the word “Constitution,” referring both to the nation’s founding document ratified in 1789 as well as to the 1797 warship (later known as Old Ironsides). This verse also mentions France explicitly, criticizing the revolutionary republic “reclined in blood,” while refusing to barter American sovereignty, justice or fame for peace—likely a reference to the bribes requested of U.S. diplomats by “XYZ.”

Verses 3, 5, 7, and 9 each make reference to the rule of American law, likely endorsing the President’s Alien and Sedition Acts that restricted foreigners and limited speech critical of the government. America’s “pride is her ADAMS—his laws are her choice” proclaims the lyric, calling for unity in the face of a greater threat to liberty. Armed resistance is called for only obliquely in this final stanza when “Leonidas’ band” is mentioned, recalling the Spartan king’s sacrifice in defending ancient Greece from Persian invasion.

Two confusions persist regarding the song. First, Paine changed his name to Robert Treat Paine, Jr. in 1801 for three reasons: to honor his deceased brother Robert, to honor his father, and to avoid confusion with the more famous Revolutionary War pamphleteer of Common Sense (1776) and the Rights of Man (1791). It is also not a campaign song. Elected in 1796, Adams was already serving as his nation’s second President.

Performance Suggestions
Consider a selection of verses (1, 5, 6, 8, & 9 work well) and dividing them among men, women, solo, trio, and choral presentations. All (possibly including listeners) should sing the repetition of the chorus; soloists rest.

Sources
This edition based on the “Second Edition-Corrected” published by Linley & Moore (Boston), 1799 or 1800.

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Adams and Liberty

Words
Thomas Paine, A. M.
later named Robert Treat Paine, Jr.
(1773–1811)

Music
Anacreon in Heaven
John Stafford Smith
Arr. Unknown

Allegretto

1. Ye Sons of Columbia who bravely have fought, for those
2. In a clime, whose rich Vales feed the marts of the world, Whose
3. The fame of our arms, of our laws the mild sway, Had
4. While France her huge limbs bathes recumbent in blood, And so-
5. Tis the fire of the flint, each American warms; Let

rights which unstain'd from your Sires had Descend-ed, may you long taste the
shores are unshak-en by Europe's com-mo-tion, The Trident of
just-ly en-no-bled our na-tion in sto-ry, Till the dark clouds of
-e-ci-e-ty's base threats with wide dis-so-lu-tion; May Peace, like the
Rome's haugh-ty vic-tors, be-ware of col-li-sion! Let them bring all the

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Adams and Liberty

blessings your Valor has bought, and your sons reap the soil, which your
Com-merce should ne-ver be burl’d, To in-cesse the le-gi-ti-mate
Fac-tion ob-scured our young day, And en-vel-op’d the sun of A-
Dove, who re-turn’d from the flood, Find an Ark of a-bode in our
vas-sals of Eu-rope in arms, We’re a World by our-selves, and dis-

fa-ters de-fend-ed, Mid the reign of mild peace may your na-tion in-
powers of the o-cean. But should Pi-rates in-vade, Though in thun-der ar-
-mer-i-can glo-ry. But let Trai-tors be told, Who their Coun-try have
mild Con-sti-tu-tion. But though Peace is our aim, Yet the boon we dis-
dain a di-vi-sion! While, with pa-tri-o-t pride, To our Laws we’re al-

-crease, with the glo-ry of Rome and the wis-dom of Greece, And ne’er may the
-ray’d, Let your can-non de-clare the free char-ter of Trade. For ne’er shall the
sold, And bar-ter’d their God, for his im-age in gold, That ne’er will the
claim, If bought by our Sov’-reign-ty, Jus-tice, and Fame. For ne’er shall the
-lied, No foe can sub-due us, no fac-tion di-vide. For ne’er shall the
sons of Columbia be slaves, While the earth bears a plant, or the sea rolls its waves.

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6. Our mount-ains are crown’d with im-pe-ri-al Oak, Whose
7. Let our Pa-triots de-stroy An-arch’s pes-ti-lent worm, Lest our
8. Should the Tem-pest of War o-ver-shad-ow our land, Its
9. Let Fame to the world sound Amer-i-ca’s voice; No In-

roots, like our Lib-er-ties, ag-es have nour-ish’d, But long ere our
Lib-er-ty’s growth should be check’d by cor-ro-sion; Then let clouds thick-en
bolts could ne’er rend Free-dom’s tem-ple a-sun-der; For, un-mov’d, as its
-trigue can her sons from their Gov-ern-ment sev-er; Her Pride is her

na-tion sub-mits to the yoke, Not a tree shall be left on the
round us, we heed not the storm; Our realm fears no shock, but the
por-tal, would Wash-ing-ron stand, And re-pulse, with his breast the as-
Ad-ams, his Laws are her Choice, And shall flour-ish, till Lib-er-ty
field where it flourished, Should invasion impend, Every grove would decay

earth's own explosion, Foes assail us in vain, Though their Fleets bridge the

saults of the Thunder! His sword, from the sleep Of its scabbard, would slumber forever! Then unite, heart and band, Like Leonidès'