

## 1776—Women's Rights and the Revolution

When John Adams was serving in the Continental Congress, he corresponded regularly with his wife, Abigail:

### Abigail to John

I long to hear that you have declared 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, be more generous and favorable to them than your ancestors. Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of Husbands. Remember all men would be Tyrants if they could. If particular care is not paid to Ladies, we are determined to foment a Revolution, and we 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 title 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 . . . ? Men of sense in all ages abhor those customs which treat us only as the vassals of your sex. Regard us then as beings, placed by providence under your protection, and in imitation of the Supreme Being make use of that power only for our happiness. [Letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams, March 31, 1776]

### John to Abigail

. . . As to your extraordinary code of laws, I cannot but laugh. We have been told that our struggle has loosened the bands of government everywhere. . . . 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. I am sure every good politician would plot, as long as he would against despotism, empire, monarchy, aristocracy, oligarchy, or ochlocracy—a fine story indeed. [Letter from John Adams to Abigail Adams, April 14, 1776]

### —Questions—

1. What does this exchange of letters tell you about the status of women in revolutionary America?
2. What kind of laws do you think Abigail Adams might have wanted to see enacted?
3. John Adams was a member of the committee that wrote the Declaration of Independence, which begins with the words, "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal . . ." Do you think that the committee members meant to limit equality to men, or that they meant all men and all women?

(continued)

