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# Book Review of Nation Builder: John Quincy Adams and the Grand Strategy of the Republic by Charles N. Edel

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# Book Review of Nation Builder: John Quincy Adams and the Grand Strategy of the Republic by Charles N. Edel

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the battle and retreating on his own initiative without orders, he was subsequently court-martialed. In a note of exquisite historical irony, his chief accuser was the grandfather of poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, who subsequently immortalized him in “The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere.” Whatever personal shortcomings Revere may have had, lack of persistence was not one of them. He requested and lost numerous hearings over many years before finally clearing his name. In this case, the initial ignominy and the eventual clearing of his name were both probably justified. He clearly was a bad officer and probably should not have been in command of the artillery. But many others were far more culpable for the disaster, and it seems that he was court-martialed as much for his obnoxiousness as for his incompetence.

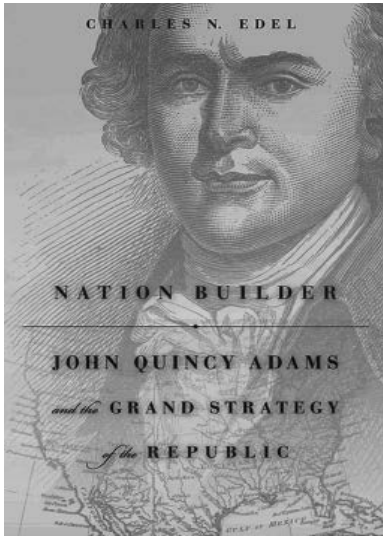
This captivating book does what few aspire to do. It unlocks a fascinating page of the American past involving a famous historical figure and an almost forgotten major battle. Anyone interested in the lives of our founding fathers, the history of New England, or the Revolutionary War should read this book.

*Stephen Donnelly is a consultant for the life insurance industry and a Westfield State University alumnus.*

***Nation Builder: John Quincy Adams and the Grand Strategy of the Republic.* Charles N. Edel. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014. 392 pages. \$29.95 (hardcover).**

Charles N. Edel, a professor at the US Naval War College, demonstrates why John Quincy Adams (1767–1848) remains one of the most fascinating figures in US history. Although interpreting Adams’s political actions through the lens of nationalism is not unusual, Edel’s biography manages to provide a fresh look at Adams as secretary of state (1817–1825), president (1825–1829), and Massachusetts representative in the US Congress (1831–1848). *The Grand Strategy of the Republic* steers the reader through each phase of Adams’ life and career, culminating in his final days as a congressman whose antislavery activism added a fiery end to an already illustrious career.

The book’s engaging narrative glistens most brightly in chapters 2 and 3, which focus on Adams’ diplomacy, incomparable contribution to foreign relations, and participation in nation-shaping treaties and territorial acquisitions (136–154). Of special note is the detailed look at Adams’ tenure as secretary of state. In these discussions, Edel offers a rare glimpse at Adams’ relationship with James Monroe and his imprint on the momentous Monroe Doctrine, which would drive the nation to hemispheric prominence (116–



117, 178–183). In spite of his influence as a diplomat, Adams was not suited to govern, Edel insists. For that reason both Adams' presidency and postpresidential career as Massachusetts' representative in Congress, outside of his challenges to the perpetuation and extension of slavery, failed. Most historians would agree with the former interpretation, but because of his oversight of the funds bequeathed to the United States by James Smithson, which established the Smithsonian Institution, and his participation in the bill to outlaw dueling in the nation's capital, most would disagree that Adams's term in the House was a failure (288). In

fact, Edel never elaborates on any of the fights that Adams lost in Congress, so this assessment remains unsubstantiated.

Yet, what Edel sees as his protagonist's true legacy is his vision for the nation. Adams' grand strategy to help firmly establish a united, independent, and morally superior republic is the book's central theme. Adams facilitated national expansion as a way to safeguard the nation from foreign encroachments and the menacing sectional divisions that threatened national security. He provided presidents from Abraham Lincoln onward with the philosophical framework from which they fulfilled the nation's destiny. Lincoln was perhaps the chief beneficiary of Adams' antislavery activism and reliance on the Declaration of Independence as the founding document containing the founders' precepts and directions for creating a virtuous republic. Well into the twentieth century, Edel aptly demonstrates, national leaders relied on Adams' for guidance (290–305).

To convey the evolution of Adams' grand strategy and efforts to strengthen the Union in a comprehensive but concise monograph, Edel had to limit discussions of Adams' personal life to his early years. The young John Quincy takes a backseat to his parents, whose influence often eclipses their son's nuanced development. As portrayed, his mother, Abigail, often played a more stifling and somewhat negative role in their son's development than his father, but the book says nothing about their influences in John Quincy's later life and career (47, 48). Their deaths go unremarked as Adams plunges headlong into national politics. This is a palpable omission since John Adams lived long enough to see John Quincy become president and died on July

4, 1826, the same day as his mentor Thomas Jefferson. The treatment of Adams' marriage to the pretty Louisa Catherine is also succinct. After marrying Adams despite his moodiness and stoicism, she used her talents as a host to advance John Quincy's career, but once Adams becomes president, Louisa Catherine resurfaces only when their son George commits suicide, and essentially disappears for the remainder of the book (255).

Throughout the book, Edel avoids using personal ambition as a driving force early in Adams' career, but this has its costs. When dealing with the fact that he severed ties with the Federalist Party and joined Jefferson's Democratic-Republicans, Edel attributes this change in party affiliation to fears over the survival of the Union (105). The book's treatment of his support for slaveholding in the 1815 Treaty of Ghent is also attributed to Adams' nationalism (251). The foundation for these interpretations is Edel's assertion that slavery was not a threat to national unity before the crisis over Missouri (96). But here the book rakes over a somewhat outdated interpretation of slavery in national politics.

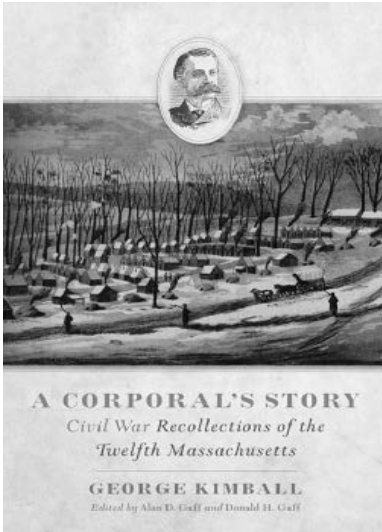
For at least two decades, scholars have noted the frequency of debates over slavery and the part that its perpetuation and extension into new territories played in deepening sectional hostilities, shaping political party development, and heated congressional debates soon after ratification of the Constitution. Yet, Edel omits both the Federalists' sectionalism and the fact that Adams resigned from the Senate after the Massachusetts General Court elected a replacement before his term had expired. What had always been a divisive topic reached crisis level over Missouri because contention over slavery lingered far longer in Congress than it had during previous debates. According to Edel, however, slavery was overshadowed by partisan politics, which posed a greater threat to the nation (247). As a result, the book does not provide a satisfying explanation for Adams' silence over slavery and diplomatic support of slaveholding the first 50 years of his public career. If, as Edel argues, his nationalist philosophy did not change, Adams' deportment in the House of Representatives differed so sharply from his previous conduct that the transformation merited a clearer analysis.

Yet, any interpretive weaknesses do not diminish the book's thematic integrity or undermine the popularity that Adams gained in Massachusetts and the rest of the nation due to his fight against the spread of slavery. Edel nicely captures Adams' mental agility and intrepidity during the final phase of his political career, including his defeat of the House's gag rule and successful defense of the *LAmistad* Africans before the Supreme Court. The book also takes a rare look at Adams' view of the Constitution's slavery-related clauses and forward-looking decisions as secretary of state. These

seldom-discussed aspects of his thought processes uncover intriguing layers of Adams' personality that are not generally featured in similar biographical studies. The book does not answer every question about Adams' philosophical transformations or Senate career, but those interested in Adams' diplomatic prowess will be delighted with Edel's focus on foreign policy. Casual readers, researchers, and academics alike will also find that the arrangement of images tells the story of Adams' life that complements Edel's absorbing yet succinct writing style. Actually, anyone curious about John Quincy Adams' legacy as a diplomat, visionary, and antislavery politician will consider *The Grand Strategy of the Republic* an important addition to their reading list and personal library.

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***A Corporal's Story: Civil War Recollections of the Twelfth Massachusetts.* George Kimball. Eds. Alan D. Gaff and Donald H. Gaff. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2014. 368 pages. \$34.95 (paperback).**



For Corporal George Kimball of Company A of the Twelfth Massachusetts Volunteers, the Civil War unquestionably began in the fall of 1860. At a political rally in Boston, Kimball and his fellow Wide Awakes became involved in a violent clash with anti-Republican demonstrators. After being hit in the ear with a brick, Kimball broke “the pole that supported my torch upon the head of one of the nearest and noisiest of the blackguards” (7). That brick, Kimball commented, was for him as much a *casus belli* as the firing on Fort Sumter

and he was ready to go to war at once.

Thus begin Kimball's vivid recollections of his tumultuous three years of service as a soldier during the Civil War. Editors Alan and Donald Gaff write that: