John Adams vigorously resisted Rousseau's diversion of the republican tradition, and the French embrace of unicameralism, resting on Spartan discipline. Adams denied Montesquieu's claim that climate and soil decide political institutions, and Rousseau's belief that "celestial virtue" will be necessary to preserve liberty. For Adams, republican virtue and liberty were products of republican institutions, not their cause, so that a republic may exist "even among highwaymen," by setting one rogue to watch another, making them honest men by the struggle. The secret of avoiding tyranny lay in "equal laws made by common consent," enforced by "three different orders of men in equilibria." Machiavelli had recognized this "eternal principle", without which every government must be "imperfect" and every commonwealth "essentially defective." Adams insisted that Americans needed different orders of offices, not of men: "Out of office all men are of the same species, and of one blood" Adams' Defence of the Constitutions of the United States of America continually reasserted the republican principle that the "eternal rule of politics among every free people" must be the balance of power in a mixed constitution. "Tyranny" consists in unchecked power, whether it rests in the hands of the one, the few, or the many. Adams gave Harrington's example of two girls cutting a cake, and rejected Rousseau's embrace of Greece, and Montesquieu's appeal to Germany. The absence of balance doomed the Greeks to perpetual butchery in a constant altercation between tyranny and rebellion. And "[n]othing ought to have more weight in America ... against mixing the authority of the one, the few, and the many, confusedly in one assembly, than the widespread miseries and final slavery of almost all mankind, in consequence of such an ignorant policy in the ancient Germans." Adams' argument for a mixed and balanced legislature began with the assertion that neither liberty nor justice can exist without "a fixed constitution of government, and stated laws, known and obeyed by all." Yet even equal laws made by common consent may oppress a minority, unless they serve "the general interest" and "the public good." Montesquieu ("scarcely ... a republican writer") may have implied that the rule of law was freedom enough in itself, but Adams quoted Livy, Sidney,
Harrington, and even Aristotle to show that republican liberty requires more, and above all a foundation in the “public interest” of all citizens. For republicans, this implies independence from any person’s will. Adams assumed that anyone who used the word “liberty” would admit that it required standing laws. The “great question” was which form of government would “compel the formation of good and equal laws, an impartial execution, and faithful interpretation of them, so that citizens may constantly enjoy the benefit of them, and be sure of their continuance.” This would be the true republic.

John Adams’ controversy with Rousseau, and Rousseau’s successors Turgot and Mably, was over which constitution would most likely preserve just laws and prevent the tyranny of any individual (or collective) will. Adams feared the traditional republican corruptions of avarice and ambition, and predicted (correctly) that a unicameral France would soon succumb to military dictatorship. Machiavelli and Montesquieu had maintained that “every man invested with power is apt to abuse it.” Adams quoted them, and extended their observation to groups, including popular assemblies. While he believed in popular sovereignty, that “the way to secure liberty is to place it in the people’s hands” and that “there can be no free government without a democratical branch in the constitution,” Adams also viewed “the interest of freedom” as “a virgin that every one seeks to deflower” – just as susceptible to demagogues in a democracy as to senators in an aristocracy or the king under monarchical government. Even the people need good orders to make them regard the “common good or interest.”

The orders Adams endorsed derived from republican Rome, where three estates “being duly proportioned and mixed together” reached “the highest degree of perfection that any commonwealth is capable of attaining to” and formed “the noblest people and greatest power” that ever existed, before the United States. From which example Adams concluded, “as from all others,” that “there can be no government of laws without a balance, and ... no balance without three orders; and that even three orders can never balance” unless each is independent of the others. When Caesar usurped all three, the liberty of Rome was over and government de jure at an end. The French might believe that citizen equality made a balance of power unnecessary but Adams identified the “natural and inevitable” inequalities of age, sex, size, wealth, knowledge, and wisdom which made balance necessary, and humanity perpetually diverse.

The essence of liberty as John Adams explained it in his Defence was the rule of just law, applied impartially to serve the common good of the people. This was also his definition of a republic, “in which the property