

Jefferson and Adams on the "Natural Aristocracy".

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<http://ageofjefferson.blogspot.com/2008/08/jefferson-and-adams-on-natural.html>

After their presidencies, Thomas Jefferson and John Adams renewed the friendship had been strained just a bit by competing against each other in two presidential elections. Adams won in 1796, Jefferson came back and beat him in 1800. They carried on a long-distance philosophical discussion that continued until nearly the end of their lives. One point they realized they agreed on was that America and all other societies had a "natural" aristocracy, and that the goal of any good political system should be to see that such natural aristocrats controlled the powers of government. Here's Jefferson, from [a letter I will quote in class](#):

For I agree with you that there is a natural aristocracy among men. The grounds of this are virtue and talents. Formerly bodily powers gave place among the aristoi. But since the invention of gunpowder has armed the weak as well as the strong with missile death, bodily strength, like beauty, good humor, politeness and other accomplishments, has become but an auxiliary ground of distinction. There is also an artificial aristocracy founded on wealth and birth, without either virtue or talents; for with these it would belong to the first class. The natural aristocracy I consider as the most precious gift of nature for the instruction, the trusts, and government of society. And indeed it would have been inconsistent in creation to have formed man for the social state, and not to have provided virtue and wisdom enough to manage the concerns of the society. May we not even say that that form of government is the best which provides the most effectually for a pure selection of these natural aristoi into the offices of government? The artificial aristocracy is a mischievous ingredient in government, and provision should be made to prevent it's ascendancy.

Read [the whole thing](#). Adams's reply can be found online beginning [here](#). The available copy is in Jefferson's handwriting, so you may need to use the link on each page that brings up a larger, higher-resolution image. Don't worry about the many historical references and ancient-language quotations in these letter unless you want to.