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A Spur To Learn Some Real History

This author—a very infrequent movie-goer—highly recommends the Steven Spielberg movie *Amistad*, which depicts the historic Nineteenth-century legal battle over the fate of 36 enslaved Africans, who fought and won their freedom, only to be threatened with the return to slavery, and death, by the judicial authorities of the United States. I recommend it not because all the historical details are necessarily correct: they are not. But, because Americans need to be provoked, once again, to think about the great principles and men who shaped our republic in its fight to become the force for truth and justice which it was created to become.

The principle which *Amistad* shows in action, is the principle of the *inalienable rights of man*, as reflected in our Declaration of Independence and our Constitution. This was an embattled principle throughout the entire first hundred years of our nation's existence. Although victory was won in the Civil War, the opponents of those principles did not give up, with the result that the foundations of our nation are still under mortal threat today.

In the *Amistad* case, argued before the U.S. Supreme Court in 1841, that principle was affirmed. And although the victory did not lead to the elimination of slavery, it is an inspiring depiction of the fight for the rights of man.

Equally important is the fact that *Amistad* introduces the viewer to the man John Quincy Adams, our nation's sixth President. The film by no means portrays the depth and brilliance of J.Q. Adams' character and achievements—but it should arouse the curiosity of the viewer. Here was a former President, now serving as Congressman, willing to challenge the growing forces of the slavocracy, and enunciating the case against slavery based upon our Founding Principles. Who in the United States knows anything about him, nowadays?

John Quincy Adams, like Benjamin Franklin, embodies the character of the American republic at its best. He was a man of universal education and culture, who understood that education and science were man's highest mission, and devoted himself to building and perfecting the institutions of the United States toward that end. It was under Quincy Adams that the United States forged a foreign policy devoted to a community of principle with other republics, and began the extensive government promotion of infrastructure-development required for the industrial takeoff which occurred after the Civil War.

To understand our nation, and its mission today, one must understand John Quincy Adams.

The *Amistad* Case

The story upon which the movie is based portrays some of the complexities of the political battle going on in the United States during the first part of the Nineteenth century. Our summary necessarily simplifies the matter.

A Spanish crew has kidnapped a shipload of Africans, destined to become slaves in Cuba. After horrific treatment and many deaths, these slaves are given Spanish names in Cuba, and transferred to another ship, the *Amistad*, for transport to another part of the island. After the *Amistad* takes off, the

Amistad
A motion picture by
DreamWorks SKG,
Directed by Steven Spielberg



slaves, under their leader Cinque, revolt, and take over the ship, killing all but two of their captors, whom they keep alive to help steer the ship back to Africa. But the Spanish captain and his aide doublecross them, directing them instead to the coast of New England, where they are captured.

At this point, the Africans are imprisoned, and the government of Connecticut is faced with the decision of what to do. The Spanish captains claim them as property; the Spanish monarchy does the same. On the other side, a group of abolitionists seeks to win their freedom. In national political circles, the case is red hot, with the Southern slave-holders determined that a precedent of freeing slaves who successfully gained their liberty, not be set.

Attorney Roger S. Baldwin won the case in two courts, successfully proving that, given the international *ban* on the slave trade then in effect, the Africans had been unlawfully kidnapped, and therefore must be freed, and not returned to the Spanish or Cubans. But, under pressure from the pro-slavery faction, and facing an election, President Martin van Buren arranged for an appeal of the matter before the U.S. Supreme Court.

At this point, former President J.Q. Adams joined Baldwin in arguing the case, and *prevailed*. The Africans were freed.



Library of Congress

John Quincy Adams

The Rights of Man

Quincy Adams' argument before the U.S. Supreme Court—then headed by no less a scoundrel than Roger Taney, of later Dred Scott-decision infamy—lasted about two days, and cannot be fully summarized here. It dealt with treaty law, property law, and the most profound issues of the philosophy of law and statecraft. At this time, February 1821, the courts had not yet eliminated all discussion of reason and principles in legal cases; it was later that they imposed narrow strictures on court arguments.

A few excerpts from the court record, however, will demonstrate how the former President approached the issue:

"I know of no law . . . , statute, or constitution, no code, no treaty, applicable to the proceedings of the Executive or the Judiciary, except that law (pointing to the copy of the Declaration of Independence, hanging against one of the pillars of the court room), that law, two copies of which are ever before the eyes of your Honors. I know of no other law that reaches the case of my clients, but the law of Nature and of Nature's

God on which our fathers placed our own national existence."

Later in his presentation, Quincy Adams directly attacked the point of view of his opposition, which demanded that the Africans be returned as slaves to their "masters," as deriving from the ideas of Thomas Hobbes. He cited an argument in the Official Journal of the Executive (who was President van Buren) which argued that the enslavement of the Africans had to be upheld as a natural consequence of man's natural state. Again pointing to the Declaration of Independence on the wall of the Court, Adams said:

"It is alleged in the Official Journal, that war gives the right to take the life of our enemy, and that this confers a right to make him a slave, on account of having spared his life. Is that the principle on which these United States stand before the world? That *Declaration* says that every man is 'endowed by his Creator with certain inalienable rights,' and that 'among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.' If these rights are inalienable, they are incompatible with the rights of the victor to take the

life of his enemy in war, or to spare his life and make him a slave. If this principle is sound, it reduces to brute force all the rights of man. It places all the sacred relations of life at the power of the strongest. . . . [Emphasis in original]

"I will not here discuss the right or the rights of slavery, but I say that the doctrine of Hobbes, that *War* is the natural state of man, has for ages been exploded, as equally disclaimed and rejected by the philosopher and the Christian. That is utterly incompatible with any theory of human rights, and especially with the rights which the Declaration of Independence proclaims as self-evident truths. The moment you come to the Declaration of Independence, that every man has a right to life and liberty, an inalienable right, this case is decided."

These statements are only vaguely referenced in the movie version—but they are fully available by Internet and other means. They open up a whole realm of American history unknown to most citizens—a realm that must be known once again, if we are to recapture our national purpose, and survive.

—Nancy Spannaus

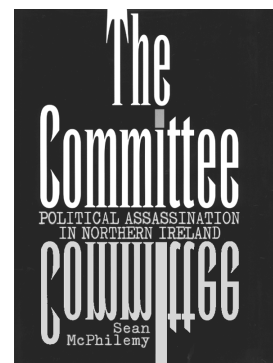
Murder Will Out

For murder, though it have no tongue, will speak . . .
—Hamlet, II, ii

Long years of bloody sectarian violence. Catholic versus Protestant. Nationalist versus Loyalist. The Irish versus the British. All this comes to mind when the "Troubles" of Northern Ireland are mentioned. But filmmaker Sean McPhilemy, in his new book, goes beneath the surface phenomena to tell a blood-curdling tale of collusion, from 1989 to 1991, between the Royal Ulster Constabulary (R.U.C.), Loyalist paramilitary death squads, and respected Protestant "citizens above suspicion," to plan and execute the murders of Republican paramilitaries and Catholic civilians.

There has been Irish armed resistance to British rule since the Eighteenth century, when Irish patriot and

American Revolution supporter Henry Grattan attempted to force the British Crown to grant a declaration of rights to the Irish, including economic independence from Britain and an end to discrimination against Catholics (who were not allowed to hold office, vote, or own land). The full story of this centuries-long political and religious warfare is beyond the scope of this review; but, in itself, McPhilemy's explosive documentation reveals a new chapter in the sordid history of Northern Ireland, which provides another piece in the puzzle of London's control of terrorism, both domestic and international. The book's weakness lies in its failure to identify the policy command structure at the highest level. However, there are threads suggested in the book which, if pulled, would likely lead to the boardrooms of the Club of the Isles and the Queen's Privy Council.



The Committee:
Political Assassination in Northern Ireland
by Sean McPhilemy
Niwot, Col., Roberts Rinehart, 1998
378 pages, hardbound, \$24.95

A brief review serves to set the recent context of this tale. From 1968 to 1972, the Catholic minority in Northern Ireland began to build a Civil Rights movement. Violent clashes occurred, British Army troops were brought in to assist the local police force, the R.U.C., and, in