A scholar in the White House is a pleasing image, if not too frequent a fact of American history. During the nineteenth century, after the passing of the talents of the Revolution, there was only one American President who was a notable sponsor of learning: that was JOHN QUINCY ADAMS. He continued the role even more strongly during his public service after he left the White House. 

The long winter nights of four years at the Court of St. Petersburg sharpened an interest in the mysteries of the firmament that sparked so mightily over the vast realm of Russia, and he began to study astronomy. His curiosity about the movements of the heavenly bodies continued during the peaceful years of his London mission in the idyllic residence at Ealing, hard by the Meridian of Greenwich. He made himself familiar with the works of Newton, Schubert, Lalande, Biot, and Laplace and other standard treatises of the day. Astronomy and mathematics appeared to him as the keys that would somehow unlock illimitable reaches of science and its application to human affairs. 

President John Quincy Adams, with his developing interest in science, tried to take the lead in his program for the physical and moral improvement of mankind, including advancement of knowledge and learning. For such a program a national university and a national observatory seemed like noble and shining instruments, already advocated by some of the country's most illustrious personages. Again a special committee of the House reported favorably on the establishment of an observatory in the District of Columbia and offered another bill to that effect. But by 1826 the reaction to National Republicanism was setting in against the Minority President, and the Opposition made successful sport of Adams's metaphor for astronomical observatories—"Lighthouses of the skies"—by misquoting it as "lighthouses in the skies."

["Connected with the establishment of a [national] university, or separate from it, might be undertaken the erection of an astronomical observatory, with provision for the support of an astronomer, to be in constant attendance of observation upon the phenomena of the heavens; and for the periodical publication of his observations. It is with no feeling of pride, as an American, that the remark may be made that, on the comparatively small territorial surface of Europe, there are existing upward of one hundred and thirty of these light-houses of the skies; while throughout the whole American hemisphere there is not one. If we reflect a moment upon the discoveries which, in the last four centuries, have been made in the physical constitution of the universe by the means of these buildings, and of observers stationed in them, shall we doubt of their usefulness to every nation? And while scarcely a year passes over our heads without bringing some new astronomical discovery to light, which we must fain receive at second-hand from Europe, are we not cutting ourselves off from the means of returning light for light, while we have neither observatory nor observer upon our half of the globe, and the earth revolves in perpetual darkness to our unsearching eyes?" (From JQA's first annual address to the Congress, December 6, 1825.)

For ten years Adams served as chairman of the special Smithsonian committees of the House of Representatives through consecutive sessions until the end of the Twenty-eighth Congress. As such he continued to present committee reports and bills—in 1840, 1841, 1842, and 1845—embodying his three principles and pressing for an observatory as the first and best means of increasing knowledge among mankind. 

"The increase and diffusion of knowledge among men," he declared in his report of March 5, 1840, "present neither the idea of knowledge already acquired to be taught, nor of childhood or youth to be instructed; but of new discovery, of progress in the march of the human mind—of accession to the moral, intellectual, and physical powers of the human race—of dissemination throughout the habitable globe." Seldom does one find in a congressional document such passages as adorn some of his invocations of the duty of the National Government to use the Smithson bequest as an instrument for advancing the frontiers of knowledge.

"The express object of an observatory is the increase of knowledge by new discovery. The physical relations between the firmament of heaven, and the globe allotted by the Creator of all to the abode of man, are discoverable only by the organ of the eye. Many of these relations are indispensable to the existence of human life, and, perhaps, of the earth itself. Who can conceive the idea of a world without a sun, but must connect it with the extinction of light and heat, of all animal life, of all vegetation and production; leaving the lifeless clod of matter to return to the primitive state of chaos, or to be consumed by elemental fire? The influence of the moon—of the planets, our next door neighbors of the solar system—of the fixed stars, scattered over the blue expanse in multitudes exceeding the power of human computation, and at distances of which imagination herself can form no distinct conception; the influence of all these upon the globe which we inhabit, and upon the condition of man, its dying and deathless inhabitant, is great and mysterious, and, in the search for final causes, to a great degree inscrutable to his finite and limited faculties. The extent to which they are discoverable is, and must remain unknown; but, to the vigilance of a sleepless eye, to the toil of a tireless hand, and to the meditations of a thinking, combining, and analyzing mind, secrets are successively revealed, not only of the deepest import to the welfare of man in his earthly career, but which seem to lift him from the earth to the threshold of his eternal abode; to lead him blindfold up to the council chamber of Omnipotence; and there stripping the bandage from his eyes, bid him look undazzled at the throne of God."