

TWO LECTURES  
on  
THOMAS JEFFERSON

*Bernard Bailyn and Peter Paret*

INSTITUTE FOR ADVANCED STUDY  
PRINCETON, NEW JERSEY

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## A NOTE TO THE READER

The 250th anniversary meeting of the American Philosophical Society in April 1993 opened with a group of lectures on Thomas Jefferson, third president of the Society. Two of the lectures were given by scholars associated with the Institute for Advanced Study: Bernard Bailyn, Adams University Professor at Harvard University and member of the Institute's Board of Trustees, and Peter Paret, Mellon Professor in the School of Historical Studies of the Institute. On the occasion of their talks, Professor Bailyn and Professor Paret each received the Thomas Jefferson Medal of the Society for distinguished achievement in the humanities.

The lectures have been slightly revised for publication; they are printed in the order in which they were given. The Institute gratefully acknowledges the kind permission of the American Philosophical Society to publish the lectures of Professors Bailyn and Paret in this separate form before they appear in the Proceedings of the 250th annual general meeting of the Society.

# JEFFERSON AND THE BIRTH OF EUROPEAN LIBERALISM

*Peter Paret*

As we know, absolute historical certainty tends to be limited to the simplest of facts: the name of a man or woman, the date of an event. Reasons for a person's work or actions, or their meanings, are much more contentious, and when we try to comprehend such matters as the political ideas that animated Americans in the second half of the eighteenth century, ideas that Thomas Jefferson expressed with unmatched precision and power, we find ourselves participating in an unending debate of interpretation and reinterpretation. Historical study, like the past it seeks to clarify, is marked by conflict. And yet it seems likely that — all disagreements notwithstanding — there is such a thing as an American view of Jefferson, which differs from the picture that has been formed of him in other parts of the world. That commonality of view, brought about by facts with which we are familiar, legends we have adopted, and by our living in a political culture Jefferson helped to create, may be unusually pronounced among us in this hall today, close to the scene of some of his most enduring achievements. It is perhaps just as well that we are meeting in a building he never entered, a building erected after his death. Were we in Philosophical Hall, next to the old Pennsylvania State House, Jefferson's spirit — as we perceive it — might overpower any effort at historical objectivity.

Scholars across the world have done important work on the history of this country; but because they look at us from the outside, they see matters differently, a difference that is often enlightening. That was already true when the American Revolution was still in progress or had only recently ended. In the same way, of course, when Americans looked across their borders, what they perceived was colored by their particular assumptions and interests. Americans at the end of the 18th century, Robert Palmer wrote in his *Age of the Democratic Revolution*, "had difficulty in understanding Europe; Europeans had difficulty in understanding America."<sup>1</sup> These difficulties arose — and still arise

today — not only from too little or even from too much knowledge, but also from the different concerns motivating each side. They saw each other, but they saw selectively, and restated what they saw in their own terms. One episode in this process of reciprocal interpretation is of particular, one might say world-historical interest. In the last decade of Jefferson's life a new political force emerged in Europe, or reappeared after the French Revolution and the Napoleonic experiment of universal empire: liberalism in its early, formative stage. From the beginning the United States and Jefferson were integrated into European liberal thought, and it is instructive to observe by what means of selection and adaptation this was accomplished. But even more enlightening than the image of Jefferson that European liberals constructed for themselves is the fact that he and they were contemporaries who confronted somewhat similar issues. From our perspective they appear to represent large historical forces trying to find their way through fundamental problems of political existence, which in modern form continue to challenge us today.

## 1

To begin our exploration of some of the links between Jefferson's life and thought and the political attitudes of early European liberalism, we might return briefly to the American Revolution. As did other Americans, Jefferson found a universal principle in the colonists' economic and political motives for separating from Great Britain. The revolution was more than a local quarrel, and therefore, it was thought, sent a message around the world. France "has been awakened by our revolution," he wrote to George Washington from Paris in 1788, a belief he continued to hold for the rest of his life.<sup>2</sup> "Celebrated writers in France and England," he noted in 1821, "had already sketched good principles on the subject of government. Yet the American Revolution seems first to have awakened the thinking part of the French nation in general from the sleep of despotism in which they were sunk."<sup>3</sup> The experience of French participants in the war for independence played a part, as did subsequent contacts — in the summer of 1789, for instance, when Jefferson was consulted on

the terms of a French constitution. In the main, however, it was the awareness of the successful revolution that impressed itself on the minds of thousands who never encountered an American in person. Jefferson was right in believing that the new nation across the Atlantic aroused enormous interest in Europe; but its ideological and psychological impact weakened with the coming of the French Revolution and was largely submerged by the tremendous changes that for the next twenty-five years swept across Europe.

By the time this period came to an end with Napoleon's destruction, Europeans had acquired a vast amount of new political experience. Whatever one's point of view now, it was affected by the failure of moderate reform in France in the early 1790s; the dictatorship, drawing some of its strength from the organized and armed urban population, that followed; and subsequent experiments with an executive by committee and various types of franchise, leading in turn to a new dictatorship of one man, who waged war across Europe from Spain to Russia, turned independent states into French provinces or satellites, and nearly destroyed the balance of power before he was defeated. It was this confusion of events, and the changes they brought about, not the triumph of American independence, that was uppermost in the minds of those who now began to advocate a greater degree of openness in the political systems of Europe.

Some were survivors of an earlier, more optimistic age: Lafayette, for example; or Mme. de Staël, whom Jefferson had met in the 1780s when he was minister to France; or another member of the reformist nobility, Destutt de Tracy, whose *Commentary on Montesquieu's Spirit of the Laws* Jefferson praised as a major work of political theory.<sup>4</sup> In 1811 Jefferson arranged to have it translated and wrote a preface for it; some years later he himself corrected the translation of Tracy's book on political economy, working five hours a day for several months on the task, and it was doubtless through Jefferson's influence that Tracy was elected a member of the American Philosophical Society.<sup>5</sup> These survivors were joined by newcomers; children of the revolutionary and Napoleonic era. Together they formed the first generation of adherents to what came to be called political liberalism in Europe, a body of ideas whose roots ran far back to the 17th and 18th centuries,



but had been shaped by the convulsions between 1789 and 1815 and by the economic and social developments that were beginning to transform European life. Except in Great Britain, liberals contended with authoritarian forces far stronger than any the American colonists had faced. In its details their position varied from country to country and within each country, differences, however, that were less significant than the features common to all.

*Most of the aims of early liberalism had been achieved or even surpassed decades earlier in the United States. Liberals favored free trade in place of economic controls by the state and by privileged institutions and associations. They insisted on every man's right regardless of background and religion to enter any trade or profession. They advocated equality before the law and an independent judiciary; freedom of speech and of the press, or at least a reduction of censorship; freedom of religion and the separation of church and state; expansion of education among the lower classes; and some type of constitutional government, with a measure of ministerial responsibility to a parliament elected by men of education and property.*

The programs that expressed this general outlook varied according to the conditions in each society. An English liberal, living in a parliamentary system that functioned effectively even if it was corrupt and marked — in Jefferson's words — by "abominably partial" representation, faced very different challenges than did a liberal in Berlin, subject to an autocratic monarchy.<sup>6</sup> That England had long ago become part of a united kingdom while German liberals still contended with the political fragmentation of their country was another major distinction. Nevertheless, a composite portrait does emerge out of the many varieties of liberalism, and when we compare its features with Jefferson's political beliefs we recognize affinities but also some pronounced differences.

Among "the essential principles of our Government," as Jefferson enumerated them in his first inaugural address, were "equal and exact justice . . . , a jealous care of the right of election by the people . . . , absolute acquiescence in the decisions of the majority, the vital principle of republics . . . , the diffusion of

information and arraignment of all abuses at the bar of public reason; freedom of religion, freedom of person under the protection of . . . habeas corpus, and trial by juries impartially selected.”<sup>7</sup> Other principles related to foreign affairs and the coexistence of the federal and state governments. For European liberals the relationship between the central government and regional authorities was not, on the whole, an issue of the first magnitude, and except for their broad support of free trade they had not yet developed an independent position on international affairs. But Jefferson’s domestic principles would have found support among all factions, except for two: his emphasis on the republican form of government, and his emphasis on the right to vote. Most European liberals in the first decades after Waterloo preferred, or were prepared to accept, constitutional monarchies; republics also had supporters, but usually only if they were based on a narrowly restricted franchise. Here was the crucial difference.

Jefferson disliked monarchies in every form although he accepted the constitutional variety as a way station to republics. He believed in self-government, the “fundamental principle that the people are not to be taxed but by representatives chosen immediately by themselves,” and he believed in a broad franchise.<sup>8</sup> Not that he favored universal suffrage. Women never, and blacks infrequently, entered into his political reflections. Even adult white males were not in his mind inevitably qualified to vote. In common with many political theorists of his time, Jefferson thought that ownership of property, especially of land, was evidence of a permanent stake in the community and helped assure a man’s independence, which alone enabled him to act responsibly in political life. Jefferson’s idealization of the American farmer went together with suspicion of the marginal, rootless inhabitant of the city, particularly in Europe but a potential danger in the United States as well. “Americans of property and means,” he wrote to John Adams in 1813, “may safely and advantageously reserve to themselves a wholesome controul over their public affairs, and a degree of freedom, which in the hands of the Canaille of the cities of Europe, would be instantly perverted.” “The yeomanry of the United States,” he assured Lafayette two years later, “are not the rabble of Paris.”<sup>9</sup>

Jefferson's belief in the individual's economic independence as the best basis for representative government and his contempt for the urban mob seem to be similar to attitudes of early liberalism. But European liberals tended to draw the lines of the politically and socially desirable much more narrowly than he. They were more accepting of deference and of a pronounced class structure in society, which they merely wanted to make more accessible to men of talent and ambition whatever their origin, and they had less faith in the judgment and actions of the great majority, who would never rise far toward economic security. They certainly were not prepared to share any political power they themselves might gain with farm hands and urban workers. Jefferson, on the contrary, never allowed his belief in a natural aristocracy of talent and his concern over the political immaturity of the poor to lessen his faith in the supreme value of individual freedom and in the rightness and, indeed, necessity of truly representative government. He was very conscious of the difficulties the American experiment in freedom continued to face, but as he wrote in 1791, "I would rather be exposed to the inconveniences attending too much liberty than those attending too small a degree of it."<sup>10</sup> Jefferson was referring to the inevitable conflicts of interest between the federal government and the states; but these words also define his fundamental political convictions.

## 2

We have contrasted Jefferson's political ideas with those generally found among the first generation of European liberals. The comparison may be sharpened if this group is reduced to a single individual, not perhaps in every respect representative of liberals even in his own society, but sharing many of their ideas. Indeed, the classic formulations of some of these ideas derive from the man I have in mind: Wilhelm von Humboldt. It is more usual to associate Jefferson with his younger brother, Alexander von Humboldt, who met Jefferson in Washington in 1804 on his way back to Europe after a five-year expedition to Spanish America. The two men liked each other, and subsequently exchanged copies of their publications and corresponded on a variety of scholarly

and political topics. But Wilhelm von Humboldt appears to be the more appropriate object of comparison. Unlike his brother, a cosmopolitan aristocrat who elevated his scholarly and private interests above all else, Wilhelm von Humboldt was marked by a strong sense of political engagement — at least until the conservative reaction in Prussia forced him from office at the age of fifty-two on January 1, 1820. Both before and after retirement, his life reveals numerous similarities and affinities with Jefferson's.

For Humboldt as for Jefferson scholarship was not merely a valued break in the routine of public affairs and the management of his family's economic resources, but an essential expression of his personality. His scholarly interests centered on the word and on the nature of ideas and their relationship with social and political reality. His empirical studies of languages, ranging from the languages of the American Indians — as a result of which he, like his brother, became a foreign member of the American Philosophical Society — to Sanskrit and Basque, formed the basis for his search for grammatical characteristics common to all languages and for his efforts to create a theory of general linguistics. His speculations on the relationship between present and past culminated in his famous essay of 1821, "The Task of the Historian." If Jefferson took poetry seriously enough to address an essay on verse meter and accent to a friend, Humboldt wrote vast numbers of poems — 1183 sonnets in his last years alone. Like Jefferson he was a brilliant and untiring correspondent, and as is true for Jefferson, although many volumes of his papers and correspondence have been published, a complete edition of his writings and letters does not yet exist.

The tenet at the core of liberalism, that people can and should improve themselves, was also central to Humboldt's political thought. During the Napoleonic era, as head of the department responsible for education and religious affairs in the Prussian government, he modernized the educational bureaucracy, reformed and expanded elementary education, which for the first time exposed large numbers of children of the lower classes to substantial instruction, introduced the humanistic *Gymnasium*, combining the study of letters and science, as the elite institution of secondary education, and was the decisive force in the founding of the University of Berlin in 1810. The university placed less emphasis on

meeting current, practical needs than did Jefferson's creation, the University of Virginia. It raised research, the seeking of truth, above technical preparation for a career. Decisive in establishing its character was the creation of a philosophical faculty, encompassing the disciplines of classical studies, philosophy, history, and literature, which no longer served a preparatory function for the professional schools but was placed level with them and sought to foster a universalistic outlook among faculty and students.

In 1792, when the French Revolution was approaching its most radical phase, the young Humboldt had written an essay on "The Limits of State Action," in which he argued that the state should concern itself only with those matters, like the common defense, that its citizens could not manage themselves, and, further, make it possible for them to achieve their full spiritual and intellectual potential. Nearly two decades later, as a senior official, he still believed that "basically things would go much better without the state," but acknowledged that only the state could provide the necessary financial and organizational resources for such enterprises as true public education or the support of scientific academies and universities.<sup>11</sup> In the following years his effort to chip away at the autocratic power of the Prussian state and his cautious proposals of representative institutions limited in membership and authority led to his dismissal from his ministerial post. Like Jefferson he retired to a country estate — in his case designed not by himself but by one of the greatest German architects of the 19th century, Karl Friedrich Schinkel; and like Jefferson he ended his life as a man sought out by his contemporaries for his idealism and dedication to scholarship and the *common good*.

Humboldt's political scope was far more limited than Jefferson's. For twenty years he occupied important positions in government, but was never its head, nor was the Prussian political system, even in its most reformist stage, ever anything but a highly centralized, authoritarian monarchy. The corporative assemblies that Humboldt vainly proposed in 1819 would have possessed less authority than the House of Burgesses of prerevolutionary Virginia. Because he acted on a more restricted political

stage than did Jefferson — a condition that to varying extent applied to all early liberals in Europe — Humboldt's programs were more limited, as was the range of his political outlook and skills. Personal attributes must not be ignored, of course; but Europe never afforded Humboldt the opportunity to match Jefferson's mastery of the entire political keyboard, from the enunciation of political philosophy and theory at one extreme, to the development and execution of policy, the manipulation of differing interests, the mobilization of pressure groups, and the bringing together of elites and the mass of voters at the other. Necessarily, and by predisposition, Humboldt, like many European liberals of his generation, remained within the bounds of an only slowly expanding circle of political privilege.

## 3

Seen from the perspective of true popular sovereignty, Jefferson and early liberalism are far apart. But interestingly enough, the differences were largely ignored in Europe. Opinions that liberals vehemently rejected when they were stated by French and British radicals were passed over in silence when Jefferson expressed them. It is not too much to say that in the years after 1815 Jefferson became a demigod in the pantheon of European liberalism. Specific political disagreements were submerged in the image liberals constructed of a great man who served as an inspiration and example of what they might also achieve. Representative is an evaluation by the French statesman and historian François Guizot. He had little to say about Jefferson's politics but much about his moral qualities. Jefferson, he wrote, was a "warm friend of humanity, liberty, and science; trusting in men's goodness as well as in their rights; deeply touched by the injustice with which the mass of mankind has been treated . . ." He accepted political power "as a necessary evil . . . , and exerted himself not merely to restrain, but to diminish it, distrusting all display, all personal splendor as a tendency to usurpation . . ." <sup>12</sup>

Among the major motifs of Guizot's portrait, we might single out Jefferson's optimism about the human condition; his scientific interests; and his suspicion of power, which goes so far

that he seeks to reduce his own. These themes often recur. Here is one more example. In 1819 and 1820 the Leipzig publisher Brockhaus brought out the fifth edition of his encyclopedia, a ten-volume work, addressed, as the subtitle states, to Germany's "educated classes." That over 13,500 sets were ordered before the work even appeared suggests the influence it had among the growing bourgeoisie, the main carrier of liberal values in Germany. The article on Jefferson again avoids mention of some significant episodes in his political life. Nothing is said about his conflict with Hamilton, for instance, or about the Louisiana Purchase. Instead the article repeatedly points to his legal and scholarly studies and to his scientific interests, notes that he designed an improved plow, introduced vaccination to the United States, and was elected to the National Institute of France; refers to his efforts to integrate American Indians into the white population; and mentions the offer of his library to replace the holdings of the Library of Congress, which were destroyed when the British occupied Washington in 1814. Jefferson's repeated withdrawals from public life are emphasized and lead to the article's concluding sentence: "He now devotes himself to scientific studies and enjoys country life on his estate Monticello in Virginia." The psychological context of the entry is provided by another article in the encyclopedia, which further shows us how the contributors thought of Jefferson and wanted their readers to see him. The article, by far the longest in the entire ten volumes, is on the United States and opens with the words: "The independent north-American state is not yet fifty years old, and already constitutes a world power in the moral as well as in the physical sense of the term."<sup>13</sup>

What we are witnessing here is history as myth-making. And the function of the myth is to provide a model. The early liberals admire Jefferson and hold him up as an example because they see him as they want to see themselves: the man of affairs and of practical experience, the scholar and scientist, who seeks to improve the human condition, help his people break out of subservience to traditional authority, and build a freer society. Above all, they praise Jefferson as someone who understands power but does not love it. Jefferson's refusal to run for a third term nearly

always forms the capstone of these literary portraits. Their authors were impressed by a man for whom the principle of rotation in office outweighed personal ambition, the wish to carry his policies to completion, the future of his political party. The two-term president is the ideal set against Europe's reality of hereditary kingship. The theme of Cincinnatus, which refers not only to the selfless leader but to every citizen who serves his country and then returns to his plow, symbolizes the kind of society liberals wanted to create. That Jefferson had been his country's chief magistrate and clearly was a gentleman, and yet could not trace his paternal ancestry beyond his grandfather, made him even more appealing to men who believed that descent should not determine political power. The deep differences that divided the real Jefferson from the early liberals counted for little as against his overwhelming psychological appeal. Even Tocqueville's identification, a few years after Jefferson's death, of Jefferson as "the most powerful apostle [of] democracy," an ideology in which Tocqueville found much to praise and also much to fear, did not seriously weaken the exemplary image of the man and the president in the eyes of his European admirers.<sup>14</sup> In their effort to create their own version of America in the constricting and contentious environment of Europe, Jefferson — as they imagined or pretended him to be — remained a valued ally.

## 4

Let me end this discussion with a shift in perspective. We have been considering ideas that occupied people two centuries ago, but of course these ideas and the conflicts between them are relevant to our own time. Jefferson and early liberalism in Europe represent two aspects of a general movement to broaden political participation in the Western world, which confronted issues that in different form are with us still. The issues relate to the divisions in political society between those who enjoy relative economic security, are educated, in 18th-century terms "have a stake in the country," and those who are at risk. Although early liberalism wanted to eliminate older forms of privilege and championed equality before the law, it opposed the expansion of political rights



to most people. As the century progressed, liberals renounced these inhibitions; but their individualistic, elitist values — their belief in merit — never fully adjusted to modern mass society and the various forms of political democracy that eventually accompanied it. Nor were they ever able to deal with the social and economic misery of the industrialized world. As a cultural attitude liberalism survives; as a distinct political force it was marginalized long ago.

After the American Revolution, in the new republic and its officially egalitarian society, Jefferson faced problems similar to those confronting European liberals. The American electorate never became as educated and as principled as he wished it to be. The country was not immune to the urban rabble he despised. His belief in a natural aristocracy with an obligation to public service fit as uneasily into democratic society as the narrower liberal attitudes fit into a heavily authoritarian Europe. But his response differed from that of his liberal contemporaries. Democracy with all its weaknesses, he believed, was preferable to other forms of governance, and American society still follows the path he among others began to lay out over two centuries ago. The contradictions of elitist and popular, even populist values are all around us, and few will claim that this country has found it easy to combine them — or ever will. But they do imperfectly yet fruitfully work together, and Jefferson's political ideas and actions are one of the earliest and strongest demonstrations in our history of the way this conjunction became possible, and why it should continue.

## NOTES

1. R. R. Palmer, *The Age of the Democratic Revolution*, Princeton, 1959–64, II, 525.
2. Thomas Jefferson to George Washington, December 4, 1788, *Writings*, ed. Merrill Peterson, New York, 1984, p. 932.
3. Thomas Jefferson, "Autobiography," *ibid.*, pp. 62–63. See also Jefferson's letter to John Adams, September 12, 1821, *The Adams-Jefferson Letters*, ed. Lester J. Cappon, Chapel Hill, 1959, p. 575.
4. Thomas Jefferson to A. L. C. Destutt de Tracy, January 26, 1811, *Writings*, p. 1242.

5. Thomas Jefferson to Du Pont de Nemours, August 3, 1816, *Jefferson et les idéologues*, Gilbert Chinard, ed., Baltimore-Paris, 1925, pp. 159-61.
6. Thomas Jefferson to Domenico Diodati, August 3, 1789, *Writings*, p. 957.
7. Thomas Jefferson, First Inaugural Address, *ibid.*, pp. 494-95.
8. Thomas Jefferson to James Madison, December 20, 1787, *ibid.*, p. 915.
9. Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, October 28, 1813, and to Marie Joseph Paul de Lafayette, February 14, 1815, *ibid.*, pp. 1309, 1364.
10. Thomas Jefferson to Archibald Stuart, December 23, 1791, *ibid.*, p. 984.
11. Quoted in Friedrich Meinecke, *The Age of German Liberation*, ed. Peter Paret, Berkeley, 1976, p. 55.
12. François Guizot, *Washington, Étude historique*, Berlin, 1884, pp. 54-55. Guizot probably wrote the essay in the late 1830s.
13. *Allgemeine deutsche Real-Encyclopaedie für die gebildeten Stände*, Leipzig, 1819-20, vols. V & X. The concluding sentence of the article on Jefferson is a somewhat free translation because in this context the German phrase "Er lebt jetzt im Schosse der Wissenschaften und des Landlebens" cannot be rendered literally.
14. Alexis de Tocqueville, *De la Démocratie en Amérique*, Paris, 1951, vol. I, ch. 7, p. 272. For a similar statement see *ibid.*, ch. 5, p. 209.

# JEFFERSON AND THE AMBIGUITIES OF FREEDOM

*Bernard Bailyn*

The reputations of those who shape the fate of nations become historical forces in themselves. They are twisted and turned to fit the needs of those who follow, until, it seems, there is no actual person left, only a complex mirror in which successive interests see aspects of themselves. Of Jefferson this is doubly — trebly — true. His reputation has had what has been called a “kaleidoscopic changeability.” For a century and a half it has been more fluid, more malleable than the reputation of any of the great figures of the Revolutionary generation, or indeed of anyone in American history.

The 450 crowded pages of Merrill Peterson’s *The Jefferson Image in the American Mind* show the fabulous complexity of the problem that faces those who wish, as we do, to pay homage to Jefferson. Which Jefferson? The Jefferson image, Peterson writes, has been “an ill-arranged cluster of meanings, rancorous, mercurial, fertile . . . [it] was constantly evolving.” Endless “errors and legends and myths” have found their way into history, and not, it seems, accidentally. The “hysteria of denunciation and the hysteria of exaltation” that have followed him through the ages were there at the start — in his own lifetime; and they were responses, in part at least, to the apparent contradictions and inconsistencies in his policies, if not his character.<sup>1</sup>

Was not this fabled egalitarian, as some have claimed, a blatant “negrophobe” who placed blacks somewhere between apes and men in the evolutionary scale? He said he sincerely loathed slavery, condemned it as “an abominable crime,” a “hideous blot” on civilization which must somehow be eliminated, but he did not free his own slaves (except a few, in his will), and at the end of his life advocated the expansion of slavery into the southwestern states.<sup>2</sup>

Was Jefferson not the ultimate libertarian, the passionate defender of freedom of speech, of the press, of religion, of protection against illegal searches and seizures, of the sanctity of

*habeas corpus*? His passion for civil liberties radiates through his most profound state paper, the *Act for Establishing Religious Freedom*. There is nothing to compare with the elegant but emotive lyricism that lies within the formal cadences of that extraordinary document. One must read it aloud to appreciate the perfection of the rhythms and the immaculate choice of words.

It is time enough for the rightful purposes of civil government for its officers to interfere when principles break out into overt acts against peace and good order; . . . [for] truth is great and will prevail if left to herself; . . . she is the proper and sufficient antagonist to error, and has nothing to fear from the conflict unless, by human interposition, disarmed of her natural weapons, free argument and debate — errors ceasing to be dangerous when it is permitted freely to contradict them.

But when Jefferson came to design the curriculum for the University of Virginia's law school he deliberately omitted books whose political and moral views he disapproved of, and proposed professors whose political opinions agreed with his own. In the early Revolutionary years he endorsed loyalty oaths; in suppressing the Burr conspiracy he tolerated lapses in *habeas corpus*; and in attempting to enforce his ill-fated embargo he ignored the 4th amendment and ruled, in certain areas and at certain times, by executive decree and the threat of armed force.<sup>3</sup>

The anomalies and apparent inconsistencies seem endless. He avoided partisan debates in public, but urged others to do the opposite, and he helped support a partisan press. He was a pacifist in principle, but he argued for a retributive war against the piratical Barbary states, on the ground that if America meant to be an effective naval power "can we begin it on a more honourable occasion or with a weaker foe?" He said a little rebellion against oppressive conditions, every now and then, would be a good thing; "the tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots & tyrants," were his famous words. But when the Haitian people rose against their French masters, he declined, as President, to help them. He was a fervent constitutionalist, indeed a strict and narrow constructionist, especially in fighting the Alien and Sedition Acts in 1798; but five years later,

in arranging for the purchase of Louisiana, he deliberately exceeded the bounds of the Constitution. "The less we say about the constitutional difficulties respecting Louisiana," he told Madison, his Secretary of State, "the better" — and he added that if some political maneuvers were necessary to overcome constitutional impediments, they should be done "sub silentio."<sup>4</sup>

Many of Jefferson's contemporaries idolized him, but others — many others — vilified him. Three generations of Adamses spoke of him venomously. John Adams, his lifelong friend and political opponent, in many ways venerated him, but he disagreed with him on basic principles, and declared at one point that Jefferson was as ambitious as Oliver Cromwell and so "warped by prejudice and so blinded by ignorance as to be unfit for the office he holds . . . As a politician he is a child and the dupe of party!" John Quincy Adams improved on his father's judgment. He conceded that Jefferson had an "ardent passion for liberty and the rights of man" but denounced him for infidelity, "pliability of principle," and double dealing. And *that* Adams' grandson, Henry, discounted Jefferson's duplicity, but wrote at length, in his monumental history of the Jefferson and Madison administrations, about what he took to be Jefferson's failure as a statesman, his opportunistic abandonment of principles, his willingness to "risk the fate of mankind" to justify his theories, and his fatal incapacity — so caught up was he, Adams said, in delusive visions of the present as a golden age — to recognize the fact that he lived "in a world torn by wars and convulsions and drowned in blood." But it was Hamilton who was Jefferson's chief enemy in politics, and his feelings were never in doubt. Hamilton feared what he called the Virginian's fanaticism and believed he was "crafty" and a "contemptible hypocrite." He worked feverishly for Jefferson's election to the Presidency in 1800, in part because he was convinced that the alternative, Aaron Burr, would be even worse, and in part because he believed that, such was Jefferson's hypocrisy, he was unlikely ever "to do anything in pursuance of his principles which will contravene his popularity, or his interest."<sup>5</sup>

So much about Jefferson seemed to contemporaries, as to many historians, anomalous and inconsistent. His appearance surprised those who came to pay their respects to the famous

statesman, the sophisticated and learned savant, the friend of Lafayette, Condorcet, and La Rochefoucauld. Tall, red-headed, and freckled, dressed in ordinary, rather dowdy clothes — (yarn stockings, a British official reported with surprise, “and slippers down at the heels”) — he sat casually, “in a lounging manner,” perched on one hip. There was nothing, one visitor said, “of that firm collected deportment which I expected would dignify the presence of a secretary or minister.”<sup>6</sup> Yet everyone recognized that his conversation was wonderfully informed and often brilliant. And why would it not be? Though he was no orator in public forums, he conversed easily, and he was a fabulous polymath: politician, diplomat, architect, draftsman, connoisseur of painting, anthropologist, bibliophile, classicist, musician, lawyer, educator, oenologist, farm manager, agronomist, theologian (or rather, anti-theologian), and amateur of almost every branch of science from astronomy to zoology, with special emphasis on paleontology.

Jefferson slipped easily from role to role. His election to the Vice-Presidency of the United States coincided with his election to the Presidency of the American Philosophical Society, a position he enjoyed far more than he did the nation's Vice-Presidency and which he proudly and actively held for the next 18 years. In the midst of the ferocious struggle, in 1801, to settle the tie vote in the Electoral College — a vote, resolved only on the 36th ballot, that would elevate Jefferson to the Presidency, transform the American government, and alter the course of American history — he calmly continued his correspondence with a professor of anatomy about the disposal of some recently discovered fossil bones that bore on disputed points of animal life in North America.<sup>7</sup>

His correspondence was prodigious: the editors of the *Jefferson Papers* have located 19,000 letters written by him. They reflect extraordinary energy, a ceaseless flow of ideas on every conceivable subject, and a restless, tenacious mind; as fertile in formulating abstract ideas as in solving the most ordinary, mundane problems. Printing presses, phosphoric matches, cylinder lamps, and the shapes of plowshares fascinated him; so too did the principles of justice and the logical strengths and weaknesses

of the thought of Hobbes, Hume, and Destutt de Tracy. He writes of the soil and of the heavens, and of everything in-between: of economics and curtain beds; of political theory and "hydrostatic waistcoats"; of international law and carriage springs; of constitutions and macaroni machines; of poetry and pedometers. Through it all there glows his humane and generous purpose: to improve upon the inheritance; to meliorate the condition of life; to broaden the reach of liberty; and to assist in the pursuit of happiness.

Historians will never fully encompass Jefferson's protean versatility, nor will they completely resolve the paradoxes in his career and the apparent contradictions in his character. But there are a few signposts along the way to help one understand some, at least, of the basic elements in his public persona, and perhaps assess a little more accurately the complexity of his achievement.

With his enormous vitality and universal curiosity, he seemed forever young. But he was in fact 33 when he wrote the Declaration of Independence — almost middle aged, by eighteenth-century standards — and though Madison was younger by only 8 years and Hamilton by 12, they seemed to belong to a different generation. By the end of 1774, when Madison, only a year from college, took his first, very minor public post, and Hamilton was still an undergraduate, Jefferson was an experienced lawyer and prosperous planter with five years of experience in the House of Burgesses behind him. They had been extremely busy years in politics. On the day he had first taken his seat in the Burgesses, he had drafted the reply to the governor's speech, and in the years that followed he wrote in quick succession several pieces of legislation, Virginia's resolution to oppose the Boston Port Act, a Declaration of Rights for Virginia's revolutionary convention, and the learned and inflammatory Instructions to Virginia's delegates to the Continental Congress. Sent to Philadelphia in 1775 as Virginia's delegate to the Continental Congress, he contributed to the drafting of the Association, which in effect set the Revolution in motion, and wrote not only the Declaration of the Causes and Necessity for Taking Up Arms but also America's reply to the British conciliatory proposals. And the next year, a month before writing the Declaration of Independence, he drew up a complete new constitution for the state of Virginia.

That he was chosen to write the Declaration is hardly surprising. It was generally known, as John Adams later recalled, that Jefferson had "a happy talent for composition." His writings, Adams said, were handed around and remarked on for their "peculiar felicity of expression."<sup>8</sup> But by then Jefferson had acquired something more important than a reputation for learning and literary skill. From his voracious reading; from his extensive knowledge of law; from his acute attention to the views of his teachers and of his colleagues in politics; and from his instinctive understanding of independence as he had personally experienced it on his borderland plantations, he had developed a comprehensive view of politics, freedom, and America's unique role in world history which would shape all of his thought and much of his actions thereafter.

It was not simply that he had helped to construct the pattern of ideas, beliefs, attitudes, and aspirations that we think of as the ideology of the American Revolution. He had personally *achieved* it — he had reached it through years of study, thought, and public controversy. To break through the barriers of the *ancien régime*, and to formulate and act on the pure principles of freedom was a triumph of enlightened thought which, he hoped, would usher in a new era in human history. In that happy time, which he felt America could now approach, legislatures would be truly representative; popular majorities would rule; the institutions of government would be strictly separated so that no person or group of people would exercise undue power; power itself would be restricted; establishments of religion would be forever banished; and the human freedoms for which mankind had yearned — freedom of speech, of the press, of worship, and the right to the security of property and to impartial judicial proceedings presided over by judges independent of political pressures — all this would be perfectly protected by the instruments of free government.

And beyond the realm of government, Jefferson glimpsed, in these early, formative years, and never lost, a vision of human felicity — a romantic vision, of sensible, hard-working, independent folk secure in their possession of land, free of the corruptions of urban poverty and cynicism, free of dependence on a self-indulgent aristocracy of birth, responsible to the common good



as well as to personal betterment, educated in the essentials of free government and committed to the principles of freedom — peaceful, self-reliant, self-respecting, and untimidated people. Occasionally the sheer romanticism of this vision would break through. “Ours,” he informed Crèvecoeur in 1787, “are the only farmers who can read Homer.” He was certain, after a year in France, that of the 20 million people in that country, “nineteen millions [are] more wretched, more accursed in every circumstance of human existence, than the most conspicuously wretched individual of the whole United States.” In France, as elsewhere in Europe,

conjugal love having no existence among them, domestic happiness, of which that is the basis, is utterly unknown . . . [Their pursuits] offer only moments of extasy amidst days and months of restlessness and torment. Much, very much inferior this to the tranquil, permanent felicity with which domestic society in America blesses most of its inhabitants, leaving them to follow steadily those pursuits which health and reason approve, and rendering truly delicious the intervals of these pursuits.<sup>9</sup>

These visions engrossed his mind and imagination. But he was never confident that these goals could be reached. It would, inevitably, he believed, be a constant struggle, and the outcome would always be in doubt. For along with the ideals of radical reform and the principles of freedom, he had inherited the belief, pervasive in radical thought in Britain for over a century, that freedom was in its nature a fragile plant that had been and would, again and again, be overwhelmed by the forces of power; that where freedom had survived it remained beset by those who lusted for domination. Even in Britain, its last bastion in Europe, Jefferson thought, freedom, overwhelmed by the corruption of Walpole’s government early in the century, had finally been destroyed by the autocracy of George III and his junto of ministers, whose depredations Jefferson itemized so fully in the Declaration.<sup>10</sup>

But the evils that had overwhelmed Britain were not unique to those once-heroic people. They arose, Jefferson believed, from human nature itself, and would take whatever form immediate

situations might require. And so, though Americans had broken free from the worst evils and had set out on a new path, he knew that the realization of this vision was uncertain at best. Everything would depend on the sheer survival of the Revolutionary nation, and thereafter on its continued adherence to the principles of freedom as he had understood them in the early years of the struggle. Dangers from the inevitable counter-forces were certain to appear on all sides, and in new and unexpected forms.

But if Jefferson had been only a radical and eloquent idealist, fearful that the achievement of freedom was precarious at best, forever beset by dangers that could easily overwhelm it, he would never have played the powerful role in history that he did. Coupled — incongruously — with his soaring idealism was the realism and hard-headed pragmatism of a superb “man of business.” Fantastically industrious, administratively efficient, with a true instinct for the moment to act and the moment to relent, Jefferson was a natural politician, as shrewd and calculating as the best and far more effective than most.

He tackled the most complex political and economic problems with tireless zest. He was incapable of boredom. In a six month period in Paris he finished a detailed consular treaty with the French government, wrote a technical treatise on the American whale fishery based on data he had been methodically collecting for several years, drew up a proposal for funding the foreign debt of the United States, continued a long correspondence on outfitting American vessels in the French fleet, wrote extensively, though surreptitiously, to Lafayette on how to manage the developing revolution in Paris, drafted cunning messages to keep the United States government from being blackmailed, and sent practical advice repeatedly to an unfortunate Virginian whose family affairs were falling to pieces.<sup>11</sup>

The Paris years were crowded with business efficiently handled, but his work as ambassador was preparatory to his labors as Secretary of State and President. The leading student of his Presidency concludes that “Jefferson brought to the presidency the most system in administration and the strongest leadership that the office had yet experienced.” He had all the qualities of a successful political executive. He balanced decisiveness with

accountability; he relied on discussion and persuasion rather than authority; and he was tolerant of dissenting views. "The first President to make the Cabinet system work," he established a close relationship with Congress. And beyond that, he kept in touch with the population at large, and made voters more conscious of, and involved in, the political process than they had ever been before.<sup>12</sup>

All of this was the work of a natural politician and an industrious, efficient administrator — abilities not normally associated with radical idealism. But in Jefferson that unlikely association existed, and it is the key, I believe, to the complexities of his public career and to the strange oscillations of his fame. If he had been less responsive to the principles of freedom as they had emerged in the initial struggle with Britain, less committed to the vision of a golden age and more cautious in seeking it, he might, when in positions of power, have been less likely to have had to modify or complicate or contradict his principles in attempting, in his efficient way, to effect them, and so in the end might have *seemed more consistent and less likely to be thought hypocritical*.

How different, in this, was he from his two younger contemporaries, who emerged on the scene after Independence had been achieved and so inherited the Revolution, and took its principles for granted. Madison, Jefferson's lifelong friend, collaborator, and political ally, was quizzical and skeptical. His mind was less capacious and less elevated than Jefferson's, but more close-grained and instinctively contrary. Less learned than Jefferson, his verbal skills inferior, he was almost pedantically alert to inner complications, and so, though less adept a politician, he was more consistent. Jefferson would, if need be, jump out of a syllogism to save the major premise; Madison, less deductive, did not need such complicated gymnastics. And Hamilton, much younger in years and even younger in spirit, responded to *different voices* altogether — voices of a social and economic world just emerging, whose relation to Jefferson's ideas could be discordant.

So it was Jefferson — eloquent theorist and efficient politician, promulgator and custodian of the Revolution's original principles, who alone, of all the creators of Independence, dominated politics into the nineteenth century — it was Jefferson who

was fated, above all others, to confront the ambiguities of freedom.

From the start, and unswervingly, he argued that government must be stripped of its self-justifying power and reduced to an instrument of the people, whose voice could only be that of the majority: "the will of the majority," he said again and again, "ought to be the law." Madison too hoped that the people, not the government as such, would ultimately rule, but he believed that legislative majoritarianism could quickly lead to the destruction of the rights of minorities. For Jefferson the solution was clear: a bill of rights, which he advocated from the moment he first saw the Constitution. "A bill of rights," he wrote, "is what the people are entitled to against every government on earth . . . and what no just government should refuse or rest on inference." But Madison — who in the end would write the national Bill of Rights — pointed out to Jefferson that to enumerate human rights would be to limit their plenitude to the few items one happened to think of, and in any case, what he called "parchment barriers" had never yet prevented anyone from misusing power. Only structural balances within a government, Madison thought, pitting one force against another, could keep the misuse of power in check and so protect minority rights. Ten years later, Jefferson used the same idea in drafting the Kentucky Resolutions, which aimed to protect individual interests by pitting the states against the nation, almost to the point of nullification. But then, shortly thereafter, as President, he overrode the states rights he had earlier defended, in order to protect the nation, first from subversion, then from the dangers of foreign wars.<sup>13</sup>

Why the inconsistency? There are times, he explained, when the rule of law itself must be suspended:

A strict observance of the written law is doubtless *one* of the high duties of a good citizen, but it is not *the highest*. The laws of necessity, or self-preservation, of saving our country when in danger, are of higher obligation.<sup>14</sup>

All men, he had written in his most famous pronouncement, are created equal — then why not black slaves? He agonized over the glaring, obvious inconsistency, came back again and again to

the bizarre anomaly of slavery in a free state — anomaly in law, in ideology, in simple justice and humanity. His loathing of slavery was utterly sincere, and he predicted that, since “God is just [and] . . . his justice cannot sleep forever,” it would one day, somehow, disappear from the face of the earth. What kept him, initially, from developing his early interest in abolition was what seemed to him to be the crippling paradox that freeing the slaves would imperil the survival of the nation’s freedom. The blacks, a majority of the population in the South, lacked the qualities, Jefferson believed, that were needed to guarantee the survival of freedom: education, experience in self-government, economic independence. Whether they would ever be able to acquire these requisites of republican citizenship — whether, if their present degraded circumstances were improved and if they were “equally cultivated for a few generations,” they would become the equals of any others — was a question that led him into a deeply troubling, unsure, and apologetic racism. What was clear in his mind was that the agrarian south — free of commercial, industrial, and urban corruption — was the bastion of the free republican nation. Black majority rule there would simply overwhelm the freedoms for which he struggled. “Justice is in one scale,” he wrote, “and self-preservation in the other.”<sup>15</sup>

The problem did not diminish in time, it grew worse. Once, in the hope of at least containing slavery, Jefferson had favored limiting its geographical spread, and in fact he was largely responsible for prohibiting it in the states of the Old Northwest. But later, fearing that the growing Congressional power of northern industrial and financial forces would overwhelm the country and destroy the delicate compromises of the Constitution, he changed his mind and supported the expansion of the institution, which he continued to despise and condemn, into Missouri and eventually other states in the south.<sup>16</sup>

Jefferson’s fear of northern economic power which propelled this strange reversal flowed from his undiminished commitment to the ideology of the Revolution in its original, pristine form. He had no need to calculate the precise political and social costs and benefits of Hamilton’s financial program. He understood the threatening implications immediately; they squared perfectly with

his historical memory and his political beliefs and fears. He, like radical theorists in Britain, believed it had all happened before, early in the century, in Walpole's buildup of the power of the British Treasury in collaboration with Britain's new, high-flying, ruthless banking and commercial interests. That alliance, he knew, had allowed Walpole to buy the votes he needed in the House of Commons, overthrow the famed separation of powers of the government, and usher in an age of limitless greed and political squalor.<sup>17</sup>

Jefferson explained this, and its relevance to Hamilton, in his autobiographical miscellany, the *Anas*. In it he recalled his return to the United States in 1789 to become Secretary of State, and his shocked discovery of Hamilton's plan for the federal government to assume the debts of the states. There was no mistaking Hamilton's purpose, Jefferson wrote. Hamilton's plan would pump money into the hands of profiteering state creditors in order to pile up "additional recruits" to the "phalanx of the Treasury." And that was not the end of the plans of the "stock-jobbing herd." Though Hamilton and his "votaries" had already become — as Walpole had been — "master of every vote in the legislature . . . the machine was not compleat . . . Some engine of influence more permanent must be contrived," and that engine was the Bank of the United States.

Jefferson feared the Bank and fought it from the start. Aside from its probable issuance of a flood of paper money that would lead to wild speculation and the creation of a "moneyed aristocracy," and aside from its encouraging long-term national indebtedness that would in time burden the living with the extravagance of the dead, he feared the Bank's political influence. He knew the historical antecedents. The Bank's stockholders, like those of the Bank of England, would forever be able to manufacture a legislative majority to suit them and so corrupt the Constitution and reshape it "on the model of England." He had no choice but to fight this scheme — fight once again precisely the battle that had been fought and lost in England. The parallels are unmistakable. Hamilton, Jefferson concluded, favored monarchy "bottomed on corruption," and he made no bones about it. If you eliminated all the corruption in the British government,

Hamilton said in a dinner conversation that Jefferson recalled verbatim, "it would become an *impracticable* government: as it stands at present, with all its supposed defects, it is the most perfect government which ever existed." Hamilton truly believed, Jefferson wrote, "that corruption was essential to the government of a nation," even though the whole history of eighteenth-century Britain, the whole history of Europe, revealed what consequences this kind of corruption could have.<sup>18</sup>

The evils of Hamilton's program and the devastating threat it posed to the nation's freedom were clear to Jefferson from the moment he returned from France. But Hamilton's immediate goal, however erroneously and dangerously pursued, was to stimulate *American economic growth*, and this was something that Jefferson himself increasingly supported. His republicanism had never been naively "classical" to the exclusion of vigorous economic development or of what has been called possessive individualism, nor did his emphasis on civic virtue preclude the basic value of personal property, its preservation and enhancement. Gradually he came to value — if not the full range of entrepreneurial efforts that Hamilton had earlier promoted, or his methods — policies strangely similar to those of the Federalists. He clung to his major premise but faced realistically the rapid shifts of the economy, and made a series of adjustments.

Convinced always that "those who labour in the earth are the chosen people of God . . . the most virtuous citizens and possess the most *amor patriae*," and that the survival of freedom depends on them, he began as a radical agrarian, hoping to avoid the corruption of a debased working class and urban slums, and content for the nation to trade staples for the manufactures of others. That led him to a policy of free trade. But then he found that commercial reciprocity was not forthcoming, and so he favored, first, commercial retaliation, then protectionism, and finally the encouragement of domestic manufactures. By 1816 he concurred in a protective tariff, and wrote that "we must now place the manufacturer by the side of the agriculturalist." If one did not, the results would be fatal.

He . . . who is now against domestic manufacture must be for reducing us either to dependence on [the economies of]

foreign nation[s] or to be clothed in skins, and to live like wild beasts in dens and caverns. I am not one of these; experience has taught me that manufactures are now as necessary to our independence as to our comfort.<sup>19</sup>

But if that was the case, had not Hamilton's economic policies, which Jefferson had so passionately denounced, been correct from the start? He struggled to square his evolving economic views with the original principles of the Revolution that continued to dominate his thought. So he accepted manufactures; they had become necessary — but let it be *household* manufactures, he said, to keep the units small. An expanded economic role of government? Yes, but let it be chiefly the governments of the states, and the federal government only by Constitutional amendment. A national bank? Perhaps: as Madison had seen when he chartered the Second United States Bank, cumulative precedent and popular usage over the years had given the Bank a sanction that could not be ignored. But let it issue, not paper currency — which was “only the ghost of money,” Jefferson said, “and not money itself” and which would breed speculative crazes and devastating inflation — but bills of credit and Treasury notes that would be quickly redeemed.<sup>20</sup>

A highly pragmatic, tough-minded, and successful politician, Jefferson never abandoned the ideals he had so brilliantly expressed in the years before Independence, and he struggled endlessly with the ambiguities they posed.

The press, he eloquently insisted, must always be free. On this he could not have been more flatly assertive, more unambiguously clear. “Our liberty depends on the freedom of the press,” he wrote, “and that cannot be limited without being lost.” *Again*: “Where the press is free, and every man able to read, all is safe.” *And again, most famously*: “Were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter.” But were there *no* limits to the freedom of the press? Yes, in fact, there were. Drawing unquestioningly on the received, libertarian tradition of the early eighteenth century, which was bound into the ideology of the Revolution, he assumed that, while one could print anything one wanted to print, one



was liable to legal prosecution "for *false* facts printed and published." But the question, he discovered in his years in power, was what, in matters of political opinion, is true and what is false? Who is to judge, and by what criteria? Why did not the "overt acts" doctrine of his *Act for Religious Freedom* apply in secular matters? Why would not his enemies' political falsehoods be as certainly defeated by truth as he had said false religious beliefs would be? Jefferson, reacting furiously to political attacks, adhered to his original view, which criminalized false statements, only to find himself forced to question his own basic premises. In the heat of party struggles he could only doubt, despondently, that truth could ever emerge from the contest between what he took to be an utterly ruthless, lying, scurrilous opposition press and his own right-minded publicists. At the end of his presidency he wrote that outright suppression of the press would be no more injurious to the public good than the newspapers' "abandoned prostitution to falsehood."<sup>21</sup>

This was not, of course, his normal stance. He truly wished for free speech and a free press; but the complexity of these liberal goals, their inner ambiguities in application, came to him only gradually.

In the mid 1780s, recognizing the weakness and inefficiency of the federal government, he shared the view that the Articles of Confederation would have to be strengthened, but only in a few specified ways. His immediate reaction to the new Constitution when it reached him in Paris was strongly negative: its far-reaching provisions "stagger all my dispositions to subscribe" to it. "All the good of this new constitution," he wrote, "might have been couched in three or four new articles to be added to the good, old, and venerable fabrick, which should have been preserved even as a religious relique." Fearing, ever, the possible recreation of monarchy in a new guise, he was certain that a President who *could* be re-elected repeatedly, *would* be, and the result would be "a bad edition of a Polish king." Madison, who had worried through every clause and phrase of the Constitution in the most critical way possible, wrote Jefferson, on October 24, 1787, a searching analysis of the drafting and character of the Constitution. In it Madison argued that an increase in the size of

a republic, far from endangering freedom by requiring an excess of power to keep order and to enforce the laws, would in fact protect freedom by dissipating animosities and multiplying factions to the point that no one interest could control the government. But Jefferson, in his reply, did not comment on this counter-intuitive idea; he reverted to the traditional fear of monarchy, elective or hereditary. Think of the Roman emperors, he wrote Madison in commenting on Presidential power, think of the Popes, the German emperors, the Deys of the Ottoman dependencies, the Polish kings — all of them elective in some sense. "An incapacity to be elected [President] a second time would have been the only effective preventative," he said. "The king of Poland is removable every day by the Diet, yet he is never removed."<sup>22</sup>

Such was Jefferson's immediate reaction to the Constitution. But soon, characteristically, as he studied the ways the Constitution would actually work, he transcended this initial response, and began to recognize the document's virtues. Within a few weeks he saw enough good in the Constitution to declare himself "nearly a neutral" on ratification. Soon thereafter he said he hoped that the requisite nine states would ratify, thus putting the Constitution into effect, but that the other four should hold out until amendments were made. Finally, after conferring with Lafayette and Paine, and convinced that the states' *recommended* amendments would quickly be enacted, he declared that outright ratification was "absolutely necessary" and that the American Constitution was "unquestionably the wisest ever yet presented to men." "We can surely boast," he concluded, "of having set the world a beautiful example of a government reformed by reason alone, without bloodshed."<sup>23</sup>

So, gradually Jefferson came to accept the Constitution's basic propositions: that power could be created and constrained at the same time; that internal balances between essential rights and necessary powers could be so constructed as to be self-sustaining; that the power of a centralized national, self-financing state could be compatible with the safety and freedom of ordinary people. The mechanics of this plan had not been the product of a grand theory. No one had designed the Constitution. It had been arrived

at by an exquisitely complex process of adjustments, balances, compromises, and modifications. And therefore it is perhaps more surprising that Jefferson came so fully to accept the Constitution, and later himself to use so skillfully the executive powers that it created, than that he opposed it when it first appeared.

For the fear of power — the very heart of the original Revolutionary ideology — was an animating spirit behind all of his thinking, and ultimately the source of the deepest ambiguities. Though as President he never hesitated to use the full authority of his office, at times to use powers his opponents claimed he had no constitutional right to use, he never ceased believing that the only truly free governments were small ward-level units in which power scarcely existed and in which ordinary citizens could easily participate in government.<sup>24</sup>

He struggled to eliminate aristocracies of birth and inherited wealth because, he believed, they inevitably created arbitrary power — irrational and unjustifiable power that, as he saw so vividly in Europe, could crush every impulse of ordinary people's desire for self-fulfillment. The evils of hereditary power profoundly moved him, and propelled his eloquence to extraordinary heights. In America, he wrote from France, there had never been legal distinctions among freemen "by birth or badge." Of such distinctions, "they had no more idea than they had of the mode of existence in the moon or planets." But in Europe the full horror of aristocracies of birth could be seen on every side. It was a world, Jefferson wrote,

where the dignity of man is lost in arbitrary distinctions, where the human species is classed into several stages of degradation, where the many are crouched under the weight of the few, and where the order established can present to the contemplation of a thinking being no other picture than that of God almighty and his angels trampling under foot the hosts of the damned.<sup>25</sup>

But Jefferson was an aristocrat himself. He enjoyed an inheritance of lands and slaves, and he shared the planter class's fear of mobs and of the rule of mass democracy. Salvation, for him, lay in the rule of *natural* aristocracies, elites of talent and wisdom, devoted to the public good. But he recognized that in America

as in Europe the leisure and education that nurtured talent were traditionally products of inherited wealth. It followed therefore, by a logic he found compelling all his life, that a massive, systematic structure of public education that would identify and nourish native talent would be necessary if America were to retain its freedom.

His "Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge" (1779) he always considered one of his most important contributions to the comprehensive revision of Virginia's laws, and he never ceased hoping that its provisions would be enacted and reproduced on a national scale. But they were not. Even in Virginia he was defeated — by parsimonious legislators; by the parochial interests of religious denominations; and by the popularity of what he called "petty *academies*" that seemed to be springing up on all sides and that inculcated in students, he said, "just taste enough of learning to be alienated from industrious pursuits, and not enough to do service in the ranks of science." Public education, "to bring into action that mass of talents which lie buried in poverty in every country, for want of the means of development," was an essential means of eliminating arbitrary power. The provision in Spain's proposed constitution of 1812 that literacy would be a prerequisite for citizenship excited his greatest admiration. "Enlighten the people generally," he said, "and tyranny and oppressions of body and mind will vanish like evil spirits at the dawn of day." But he did not live to see that dawn, nor could he conceive that a strange, unsystematic *mélange* of schools — public and private, parochial and secular — would one day create the universal education he so passionately desired.<sup>26</sup>

Similarly, he opposed political parties, on principle, because he believed that organized political machines generated arbitrary power, power for partisan groups — selfish, power-hungry cliques, which inevitably violated the public interest. It was therefore logical for him to declare, after the bitter presidential election of 1800, that "we are all republicans; we are all federalists" since he could only think of the federalist party not as a legitimate ruling body that differed from the republicans on matters of policy, but as a malevolent junta (a "herd of traitors," he called them) who dream of "a single and splendid government of an

aristocracy, founded on banking institutions and moneyed incorporations . . . riding and ruling over the plundered ploughman and beggared yeomanry." Once the federalist leaders were driven from office, their followers would naturally (Jefferson believed) join the national — that is, Republican — majority. But parties survived, and for that Jefferson himself was largely responsible. To destroy the Federalist party he had had no choice but to create his own, more effective party, with devoted cadres, good organization, and an articulated program. In the process he did much, modern historians agree, "to engrain into American political life the party system, to make party government acceptable, to make party machinery a normal part of political activity, [and] to make party and patronage inseparable."<sup>27</sup>

His hatred of poverty, too, was rooted in his elemental fear of arbitrary power. If he had not known from history that ignorant, idle, impoverished people were always the helpless tools of demagogues, he would have discovered it in his years in Europe. In general, his experiences there confirmed his ideological commitments, and none more than his belief that economic debasement and political tyranny go hand in hand.

He was horrified by the poverty he saw in France. A casual encounter with a beggar woman outside Fontainebleau, her tears of gratitude for the few coins he gave her, touched off "a train of reflections on [the] unequal division of property." The wealth of France, he wrote Madison, "is absolutely concentrated in a very few hands." The *grande*s employ "the flower of the country as servants," leaving the masses unemployed — begging and desperate — while vast lands are set aside as game preserves. He was well aware, he wrote, "that an equal division of property is impracticable," but the staggering inequality he was witnessing created such misery that, for the preservation of freedom if not for simple justice, every effort must be made legally to subdivide inherited property and to distribute it equally among descendants.<sup>28</sup>

It had been for that reason in 1776 that he had written the law abolishing primogeniture and entail in Virginia, and in his draft constitution for the state he had stipulated that "every person

of full age" who did not own 50 acres of land would be entitled to that amount from the public domain.<sup>29</sup> The earth, he said again and again, by natural right belongs to the living and not to the dead or to their privileged descendants. Where, as in France, vast territories owned by the few are left wild while masses starve, natural right is violated, and in time those deprived of that right may well lay claim to it in ways no responsible person would favor. Poverty, Jefferson believed, was thus a political as well as a social curse; it was the foundation of an unjust concentration of political power, and led inevitably to the destruction of freedom. But he had no program for preventing the growth of poverty or for abolishing it where it existed. And he was repeatedly attacked for promoting policies that depressed the economic well being of whole regions, chief among them his embargo of 1807-8.

That policy was devised and sustained by his idealistic passion for rational and peaceful solutions to international conflicts, but it proved to profit the rich and the unscrupulous while sacrificing the welfare of the poor. His critics were relentless. New England and the middle states, they charged, deprived of commerce and overseas markets, were devastated, but at least they could find partial relief in manufactures for a protected home market. The south, however, and Jefferson's own state in particular, had no such means of relief. "Tobacco was worthless," Henry Adams would write, relishing the irony of Jefferson's presidency in a brilliant passage of his *History*,

but four hundred thousand negro slaves must be clothed and fed, great establishments must be kept up, [and] the social scale of living could not be reduced. . . . With astonishing rapidity Virginia succumbed to ruin, while continuing to support the system that was draining her strength. No episode in American history was more touching than the generous devotion with which Virginia clung to the embargo, and drained the poison which her own President held obstinately to her lips. . . . The old society of Virginia could never be restored. Amid the harsh warnings of John Randolph it saw its agonies approach; and its last representative, heir to all its honors and dignities, President Jefferson himself woke from his long dream of power only to find his own fortunes buried in the ruin he had made.<sup>30</sup>

Fearing concentrations of power, and arbitrary power of any kind — convinced that America's experimental achievements in freedom were beset by forces that would destroy them — but endowed, himself, with an instinct for power and with exceptional political and administrative skills, and blessed with many years of active life in politics — Jefferson, more than any of the Revolution's original leaders, explored the ambiguities of freedom. If the principles that had emerged in the great struggle with Britain before 1776 had not been so clear, so luminous and compelling, in his mind; or if he had remained on the sidelines, commenting like a Greek chorus on the great events of the day, the world would have been simpler for him, the ambiguities less painful, and his reputation less complicated. As it was, he remained throughout his long career the clear voice of America's Revolutionary ideology, its purest conscience, its most brilliant expositor, its true poet, while struggling to deal with the intractable mass of the developing nation's everyday problems. In this double role — ideologist and practical politician, theorist and pragmatist — he sought to realize the Revolution's glittering promise, and as he did so he learned the inner complexities of these ideals as well as their strengths. He never ceased to fear that the great experiment might fail, that the United States might be torn apart by its internal divisions or overwhelmed by the pressures of the outside world and, like so many other nations, in the end forfeit its freedom for a specious security. But he did not despair. He hoped, with increasing confidence, that the common sense of the people and their innate idealism would overcome the obstacles and somehow resolve the ambiguities, and that America would fulfill its destiny — which was, he believed, to preserve, and to extend to other regions of the earth, "the sacred fire of freedom and self-government," and to liberate the human mind from every form of tyranny.<sup>31</sup>

## NOTES

1. Merrill D. Peterson, *The Jefferson Image in the American Mind*, New York, 1960, pp. 444, 443, 447, 279.
2. For the most recent attack on Jefferson's "negrophobia," see Michael Zuckerman, *Almost Chosen People*, Berkeley, 1993, p. 196. On Jefferson, slavery, and racism more generally, see below, note 15.

3. Leonard W. Levy, *Jefferson & Civil Liberties: The Darker Side*, Cambridge, Mass., 1963, summary p. 18, details in chapters 3–7. Levy's book is a relentless brief for the prosecution, a bill of particulars, but the information it contains is invaluable.
4. Matthew Davis, Aaron Burr's political client, wrote a detailed indictment of Jefferson's disavowed but apparently effective role in the destruction of Aaron Burr's political career: Jeffrey L. Pasley, "Artful and Designing Men: Professional Politicians and the Creation of American Political Culture, 1776–1840" (PhD diss., Harvard University, 1993), ch. 2 (interchapter). On the Barbary pirates, Julian P. Boyd, et al., eds., *Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, Princeton, 1950– , VII, 512. On rebellions, *ibid.*, XII, 356. On the Haitian rebellion, Zuckerman, *Almost Chosen People*, ch. 6. On Louisiana, Dumas Malone, *Jefferson and His Time*, Boston, 1948–81, IV, 316.
5. Merrill D. Peterson, *Adams and Jefferson: A Revolutionary Dialogue*, [1976] Oxford, 1978, p. 74; Levy, *Jefferson & Civil Liberties*, p. 158; Peterson, "Henry Adams on Jefferson the President," *Virginia Quarterly Review*, 39 (Spring 1963), 192, 193; Noble E. Cunningham, Jr., *In Pursuit of Reason: The Life of Thomas Jefferson*, Baton Rouge, 1987, p. 233; Harold C. Syrett, et al., eds., *Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, New York, 1961–79, XXV, 320.
6. Malone, *Jefferson*, IV, 371; Cunningham, *Pursuit of Reason*, p. 139.
7. Malone, *Jefferson*, III, 341–45, ch. 30.
8. Carl Becker, *The Declaration of Independence*, [1922] New York, 1945, p. 194, ch. 5.
9. Boyd, ed., *Papers*, XI, 44; VIII, 404, 568–69.
10. Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, enlarged ed., Cambridge, Mass., 1992, chs. 3, 4.
11. For a summary of Jefferson's work as a minister in Paris, see Bailyn, *Faces of Revolution*, New York, 1990, pp. 35–39.
12. Noble E. Cunningham, Jr., *The Process of Government under Jefferson*, Princeton, 1978, pp. 317–19, 321; Cunningham, *The Jeffersonian Republicans in Power*, Chapel Hill, N.C., 1963, pp. 304–5.
13. Boyd, ed., *Papers*, X, 50; XII, 440; XIV, 18–19; Bailyn, *Faces of Revolution*, p. 245; Malone, *Jefferson*, III, 401–5.
14. *Ibid.*, IV, 320.
15. The fullest discussions of the controversial subject of Jefferson's racism and his views on slavery are John C. Miller, *The Wolf by the Ears*, New York, 1977, and Winthrop D. Jordan, *White Over Black*, Chapel Hill, N.C., 1968, ch. 12. Jefferson's speculative racism, expressed especially in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, [1785], William H. Peden, ed., Chapel Hill, N.C., 1954, pp. 137–43, 162–63, touched off torrents of commentary. The tentative, unsure, troubled nature of his thinking on the subject comes out clearly in his famous letter to Henri Gregoire, written twenty years after the *Notes*: "Be assured that no person living wishes more sincerely than I do, to see a complete refutation of the doubts I have myself entertained and expressed on the grade of understanding allotted to them [Negroes] by nature, and to find that in this respect they are on a par with ourselves. My doubts were the result of personal observation on the limited sphere of my own State, where the opportunities for the developing of their genius were not favorable, and those of exercising it still less so. . . . they are gaining daily in the opinions of nations, and hopeful advances are making towards their re-establishment on an equal footing with the other colors of the human



- family." (Feb. 25, 1809; Paul L. Ford, ed., *The Works of Thomas Jefferson*, New York, 1904-05, XI, 99-100.)
16. Malone, *Jefferson*, VI, ch. 23.
  17. Isaac Kramnick, *Bolingbroke and His Circle*, Cambridge, Mass., 1968, chs. 2, 3.
  18. Ford, ed., *Works*, I, 174, 177, 178, 179, 180.
  19. *Ibid.*, X, 522; V, 11; *Notes on Virginia*, pp. 164-65; Malone, *Jefferson*, V, 620, 628; Ford, *Works*, XI, 504.
  20. Donald F. Swanson, " 'Bank Notes Will Be But As Oak Leaves': Thomas Jefferson on Paper Money," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, 101 (Jan. 1993), 43; William D. Grampp, "A Re-examination of Jeffersonian Economics," *Southern Economic Journal*, 12 (1946), 263-82.
  21. Boyd, ed., *Papers*, IX, 239; Ford, ed., *Works*, XI, 497; Boyd, ed., *Papers*, XI, 49; Levy, *Jefferson & Civil Liberties*, p. 46; Ford, ed., *Works*, X, 417.
  22. For the three reforms of the Articles of Confederation that Jefferson advocated in the months before the Philadelphia convention met (a general rule for admitting new states, a shift from property to population as the basis for federal taxation, and a stronger commerce clause) see Boyd, ed., *Papers*, X, 14-17. On Jefferson's responses to the Constitution: *ibid.*, XII, 351, 440-41.
  23. *Ibid.*, XII, 446, 558, 569, 571; XIII, 208-9, 232, 378; XIV, 678.
  24. Bailyn, *Ideological Origins*, ch. 3; Garrett W. Sheldon, *The Political Philosophy of Thomas Jefferson*, Baltimore, 1991, pp. 61-72, 143-45.
  25. Boyd, ed., *Papers*, X, 52.
  26. *Ibid.*, II, 526-35; Ford, ed., *Works*, XI, 399; Henry A. Washington, ed., *Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, Washington, 1853-54, VII, 94-95; Ford, ed., *Works*, XI, 523-24.
  27. Washington, ed., *Writings*, V, 608; Ford, ed., *Works*, XII, 427; Cunningham, *Jeffersonian Republicans in Power*, p. 305.
  28. Boyd, ed., *Papers*, VIII, 681-82.
  29. *Ibid.*, I, 362.
  30. Henry Adams, *History of the United States of America during the Second Administration of Thomas Jefferson*, [1890] New York, 1962, II, 281-82.
  31. Malone, *Jefferson*, V, 667; Ford, ed., *Works*, IX, 148.

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