

## Jefferson, the Liberal<sup>1</sup>

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Member of the Continental Congress, governor of Virginia, minister to France, secretary of state, vice-president and President of the United States, Thomas Jefferson held enough high offices to give him a place of distinction in American history. That he lives in the minds and hearts of men the world over is not due to the imposing list of important posts that he filled. There were qualities in the man that left an indelible impression. In regard to the high stations that he occupied, it is rather that he exalted them than that they added to his stature. Born in 1743, on April 13, the great Virginia liberal died on July 4, 1826, at the age of eighty-three. A landholder who married into one of the first families of Virginia, conditions invited him to become a conservative. A reader and thinker as well as an actor, he did not follow the most natural pathway but early became and remained a liberal to the end of his long career.

It has never been easy to say definitely just what greatness consists of, but the verdicts of history relative to characters classified as great are seldom successfully challenged. Of all the great American contemporaries of Jefferson, perhaps Washington presents the most difficult question when an attempt is made to analyze his greatness. The best answer seems to be that he was possessed of a balanced judgment—that he had the poise which enabled him to command the respect and attention of others no matter how keen, able, educated, or philosophical they might be. With Jefferson, it was undoubtedly his power to understand men and events and to evaluate them, not only at the moment, but in larger perspective. He did not float with the current nor reach conclusions on the basis of his own interests or those of his class. Looking backward, forward, and under the surface as he lived through his period, he interpreted historic currents with rare insight.

Civilization in Virginia had been in the making for more than a century and a half when Jefferson came to manhood. Eighteenth-century Virginia was indeed a fine part of the

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world in which to be born and to grow up. This was a real piece of good fortune for Thomas Jefferson as it was for a number of his able contemporaries. The spell that Virginia cast over her sons and daughters in her flowering time was not lost on Jefferson, but it did not dominate him. He saw the defective as well as the sound elements in the institutional structure of his native province and early became a leader in the crusade to make a better and greater Virginia. He became a reader and a thinker who was attracted by the criticisms and constructive proposals of daring minds of Europe as well as of America. While yet a young man, he developed strong liberal tendencies and found pleasure in exposing what he believed to be the fallacies in the views of reactionaries. Not only during his young manhood and middle life did he delight in puncturing the smugness of Tory minds, but he also liked to stir them up in his sunset years. It is such a common observation that men who acquire property and established position as they live out their days become more and more conservative with advancing years that it is not much noticed. It is, however, something worthy of consideration when a man does not fit the regular formula. Especially is this true when attending circumstances would naturally make the man a conservative from the beginning of his public career.

Jefferson lived through the age of the American and French revolutions at the time when the commercial revolution reached a climax and when the industrial revolution was passing through its first stages. The changing scene profoundly influenced him, but while many able men became thorough reactionaries in opposition to the currents of revolution, he was not frightened by the demands or doings of radicals at home or abroad. With their desires and activities, he had much sympathy, but he did not advocate or plan rash or sweeping changes, much as he was hated for his liberalism by the Bourbon-minded "saviors of society."

When the Revolutionary War was on, many American conservatives became engrossed in the movement. In the days that "tried men's souls," General Washington and Thomas Paine felt a kinship of spirit; but when, some years later, the latter sent from England to his one-time fellow rebel fifty copies of his pamphlet, *The Rights of Man*, conservative President Washington was much embarrassed. In

1802, Paine, again in America, attended one of Jefferson's receptions to which had been invited a small number of senators and representatives of both parties, such a group as was frequently entertained at the President's home. An astonished and disgusted Federalist guest reported that, while he was present, "Thomas Paine entered, seated himself beside the President and conversed and behaved toward him with the familiarity of an intimate and an equal! . . . "

When Washington decided that he could no longer acquiesce in the activities of Genet, Jefferson joined with the President and the other department heads in asking the recall of the French representative. At the same time, he alone among the President's cabinet opposed the policy of ordering a battery to be erected on Mud Island for the purpose of firing on the "Little Sarah," a vessel of the French Republic, should it attempt to depart pending a decision of President Washington. Jefferson gave as one of his reasons for this opposition that he "would not gratify the combination of kings with the spectacle of the only two republics on earth destroying each other for two cannon. . . . "

In 1798 when the war fever against France ran high, nothing would have been more natural than for Jefferson, then serving as vice-president, to swim with the current. By so doing, he could have won great popularity with the temporarily all-powerful war party, but he did not take this easy road. Instead, when the majority embraced an anti-alien policy and undertook to suppress criticism of government policies and leaders, he became the director of a quiet crusade which for a time looked like a forlorn undertaking. For months his influence remained at low-water mark. It required great courage, patience, and faith to stand by his principles in this crisis of 1798. As he said in his own way, "all the firmness of the human mind" must be "in a state of requisition." As he saw his followers flock to the war party in great numbers, Jefferson found himself shunned because he steadfastly stood by his convictions. He wrote in this time of gloom:

Party passions are indeed high. Nobody has more reason to know it than myself. I receive daily proof of it from people who never saw me, nor know anything of me but through Porcupine and Fenno. At this moment all the passions are boiling over, and one who keeps himself cool and clear of the contagion, is so far below the point of

ordinary conversation, that he finds himself insulated in every society. However the fever will not last.

In his letters to steadfast friends, the last note expressed in the above-quoted passage often appeared. Admitting that the immediate outlook was dark, the founder of the Republican party, which now seemed about to vanish, declared an opportunity would come for lost principles to be regained. It was not long until his prophecies were proved to be correct. France made peace overtures to the United States which John Adams immediately welcomed. Federalists and Republicans were almost equal in strength in 1796-1797, but in 1798 the Federalists gained an overwhelming ascendancy. The sudden shift to a peace policy by President Adams produced dissension among Federalist leaders, which permitted a rapid return of Republican strength. In January, 1799, Jefferson referred to the war hysteria as the "XYZ inflammation." The return tide was so strong in the latter part of 1799 and 1800 that the powerful Federalist party was slightly defeated and the Republicans took over the government in 1801.

Understanding the ineptitude of Federalist leaders to organize and guide the rank and file of their party, Jefferson sought to detach and win over to the support of his administration large portions of the Federalist following. That is why he said in his first inaugural: "We are all Federalists; we are all Republicans." He did not mean that he accepted Federalist policies or that the Hamiltonians would cease to hate him. By dealing kindly with them, he believed, or at least hoped, that he could turn the less pretentious elements included in the Federalist ranks into Republicans. Especially did he count on the return of all citizens with Republican sympathies who had drifted into the war party in 1798. The Republican showing of 1804, as compared with that of 1800, indicates that the drift from the defeated party to the party of Jefferson was quite marked from 1801 to 1804. The Federalist system was not overthrown by the new administration and the so-called "revolution of 1800" meant a change of attitude and outlook rather than the overthrow of established institutions or the rejection of policies.

The purchase of Louisiana was made possible because a shifting world situation forced Napoleon to adopt a change of program. Prior to the acquisition, however, Jefferson had

persistently opposed an attack on New Orleans or West Florida. Holding such a position, he ran the risk of losing the support of his western followers. The situation was aggravated by the fact that Federalist Senators Gouverneur Morris and James Ross cleverly championed the cause of dissatisfied and belligerent westerners. Relative to the activities of Morris and Ross in the Senate, Jefferson wrote after the consummation of the purchase of the vast region of Louisiana:

I did not expect he [Napoleon Bonaparte] would yield till a war took place between France and England, and my hope was to palliate and endure, if Messrs. Ross, Morris, &c. did not force a premature rupture, until that event. I believed the event not very distant but acknowledge [*sic*] it came sooner than I expected.

It was fortunate for Jefferson that his hold on his supporters beyond the mountains was strong enough that they were not stampeded. Their loyalty to him enabled him to succeed. His ability to face the situation intelligently and relinquish his enmity to a broad construction of the Constitution was another vital factor in the acquisition of Louisiana. Consistency is a splendid quality, but it has often prevented men from taking statesmanlike courses. At this important moment in his career, Jefferson dared to base his decision on the welfare of his country whatever advantage might be given to hostile critics. It may be added that those Federalists who condemned the Louisiana Purchase had to face about and adopt the doctrine of strict construction.

In the trying years from 1805 to 1809 when Great Britain and Napoleon tried to fight their battle through the issuance of anti-neutral decrees and orders, Jefferson sought to avoid war. Believing in the efficacy of employing the economic weapon, he clung stubbornly to his embargo policy through 1808. The policy was abandoned by the Republican party under Madison, but Jefferson never surrendered his belief in his embargo. The wisdom of the policy is debatable, but charges that it was unsound have never been substantiated. The lack of statesmanship on the part of Napoleon and the British Tory leaders in attempting to ruin each other by wrecking American commerce is much more easily demonstrated.

While Jefferson was President, he was supported by a majority in Congress. He was, therefore, able to perform

like a responsible prime minister. He led his party, and his party controlled both the House and Senate. Federalists had "retired into the judiciary," which gave Jefferson an opportunity to reveal that he was no friend of the doctrine of separation of powers. The writer is bold enough to say that this is much to his credit and laments to add that American citizens have been exceedingly slow to see the foolishness and danger of a system which makes frequent deadlocks possible and easy. There is reason behind responsible leadership and cooperation between executive, legislative, and judicial agents of the people; but government by deadlocks is well-nigh impossible. Moreover, the outmoded doctrine of separation of powers is a great menace to the future of the American government. It has been amply tested and found wanting and should be junked before it does irreparable harm in some crisis.

The larger things in the life of Jefferson have been extensively written about. In this brief treatment of the liberal leader, the fact that he often refused to follow the natural course has been noted. The belief is that thus one finds the clue to his greatness. His deep interest in agriculture, science, and invention, as well as in political, economic, and social problems, helped to make the man what he became. His sincere concern for the welfare of people generally set him apart from leaders, however able, who labored for the interests of a class and raised up enemies against him. It is understandable that he should be hated, but as one studies his life from the sources, it is impossible not to develop a feeling of pity for his contemporaries, especially for those among them who were educated, cultured, and successful, who indulged in the luxury of despising a leader who was possessed of so many interests and who was a confirmed liberal. What does it profit one to hate a great man?

What stand would Jefferson take on this or that policy, were he living today? This question is always coming up. No one can answer it definitely in regard to any specific policy, but certain statements can be made without much fear of successful contradiction. If Jefferson were to live again, he would not be Jefferson unless he were a liberal. This being true, he could not defend as sacred every established institution, nor could he consider the work of men who lived in an earlier period under different social and

economic conditions as final. To be himself, he would have to rejoice in the replacement of worn-out institutions, or laws, or customs by others designed to promote human welfare. He would often have to reject the views of reactionaries and laugh at their dire predictions of calamity should proposed innovations be tried out. He could not live in our time without being hated by those who cannot abide liberalism and being supported and revered by those who believe that the lot of the masses of mankind can still be and should be improved.

If Jefferson were privileged to come back, he would make some mistakes in regard to current problems as he did when he lived. Not prone to venerate too deeply what was done by the fathers, he would reject many things in the established order and criticize some of the sayings of the fathers, including some of his own. Being himself, he could not accept in a new age all that seemed sound to him in his own time. His opinions relative to the problems presented by American industrialism in its present stage would be interesting, for these problems would seem of vast importance to him. Having lived during the early stages of the industrial revolution, about which he thought and said too little, he would undoubtedly find it an absorbing interest about which he would reflect and write and work out some kind of program of action. A thinking contemporary of Napoleon Bonaparte, in whom he lost faith when the revolution made him Emperor, Jefferson, who thought so much about the problems of Europe and the world during his period of maturity, would be profoundly stirred by the global conflict that is on in 1943, two hundred years after his birth. He would surely not fail to comprehend the deep need for world cooperation nor to discern the reasons why favored America should prove a great asset to the peoples of the rest of the world in the period of reconstruction that lies ahead.