" 'The yeomanry of the United States are not the *canaille* of Paris': Thomas Jefferson, American Exceptionalism, and the 'Spirit' of Democracy. "

Brian Steele

"We have believed as a nation that other peoples had only to will our democratic institutions in order to repeat our own career."

Frederick Jackson Turner[1]

"There is no special Providence for Americans."

John Adams[2]

With the growth (and celebration) of democracy in the United States in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth-centuries came a powerful undercurrent of skepticism about the capacity of people to wisely govern themselves as well as an ambivalence about the relationship of democratic majorities to dissenting minorities and individual liberty.[3] Manifestation of these concerns has ranged from the highly theoretical, deeply serious, and compelling ruminations of thinkers like James Madison, John Adams, Henry David Thoreau, Orestes Brownson, and John C. Calhoun, and, of course, not least, French observer Alexis de Tocqueville to the cynical or merely curmudgeonly (and sometimes resentful) observations of Hugh Henry Brackenridge, Landon Carter, and Philip Hone, Esq. This undercurrent, though generally submerged beneath the "perpetual self-adoration" in which Tocqueville believed the American people liked to bathe, has been a persistent feature of American thought through the twentieth-century and beyond.[4] The

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[1] Turner, The Frontier in American History (New York, 1920), 244.

[2] *A Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States of America* (1787), in Charles Francis Adams, ed., *Works of John Adams*, 10 vols. (Boston, 1851), 4: 401.

[3] Of course, democracy's critics long ante-dated the existence of the United States. My point here is that the near-universal celebration of democracy that has accompanied its rise in the United States has also had its detractors.

[4] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (New York, 2004), 295. For a recent thoughtful manifestation of this ambivalence, see Rick Shenkman, *Just How Stupid Are We? Facing the Truth About the American Voter* (New York, June 2008). Shenkman's basic argument is Jeffersonian: that

ambivalence (as well as the downright cussedness) many American intellectuals have felt about the rule of the people is nicely encapsulated in these curmudgeonly lines from e.e. cummings:

> Humanity i love you
> because you would rather black the boots of
> success than enquire whose soul dangles from his
> watch-chain which would be embarrassing for both
>
> parties and because you
> unflinchingly applaud all
> songs containing the words country home and
> mother when sung at the old howard.[5]

John Adams could hardly have improved on this, though he came close with his 1813 observation about "the stupidity with which" the people "not only become the… Dupes" of their "aristocratical" leaders, "but even love to be Taken in by their Tricks." "I feel a stronger disposition to weep at their destiny," Adams lamented, "than to laugh at their Folly."[6] Needless to say, perhaps, Thomas Jefferson, to whom Adams wrote those words, was not part of this tradition and he rejected, as a matter of course, all of its instincts and assumptions about the inherent human capacity for self-government.

But the source of much of our present ambivalence about Jefferson is the tension between our sense that he was not inclusive enough to be what most of us [we?] would be willing to call a "democrat," on the one hand, and, on the other, that he (unlike Adams, for example) was too naïve about the ability of ordinary white men to make wise

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you cannot have a republic with a citizenry that is uninformed. But Shenkman's documentation of current American ignorance mark a kind of descent from Jefferson's exalted vision of the ability of Americans to sort out truth from fiction. For a bit more acerbic take on America's current crisis of knowledge, see Susan Jacoby, *Age of American Unreason* (New York, 2007).

[5] e.e. cummings, "Humanity I love you," *XLI Poems* (1925).

[6] Adams to TJ, November 15, 1813, in Lester J. Cappon, ed., *The Adams-Jefferson Letters: The Complete Correspondence between Thomas Jefferson & John & Abigail Adams* (Chapel Hill, 1959), 398.

decisions in a deliberative democracy to offer us anything useful in the way of a political theory. But Jefferson, whose democratic theory was both stunningly inclusive in his own day (and the major source of Federalist opposition to him) and shockingly exclusive in ours, had a better sense of what he meant by "democracy" than we do, and the problem may lie less with him than with our own unwillingness to define our terms. If we mean, by "democracy," a government peculiarly responsive to majority sentiment, then we tend to think Jefferson incontrovertibly a democrat, though, as we will see, Jefferson long believed that such sentiment should be filtered through representatives from the "natural aristocracy" and tempered by checks and balances. If we mean, instead, that democracy must incorporate the most capacious possible effort to encourage participation without limitations on race and gender, then Jefferson looks remarkably out-dated, at best, even un-American in the eyes of some critics.[7] There are so many compelling and well-understood reasons to challenge Jefferson's long-standing association in the American imagination with our more expansive concept of "democracy" that it seems gratuitous to revisit them here. Jefferson's complicity with slavery, his mostly unchecked racism, his hostility to women's participation in high politics, and his embrace of a more traditional conception of elite leadership than any later American politics would allow all provide a number of asterisks next to Jefferson's name in the record book of our democracy.[8]

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[7] See my chapter on the *Notes*.

[8] Perhaps the most forceful and explicit statement disassociating Jefferson from the "modern civil religion" of America remains Conor Cruise O'Brien, "Thomas Jefferson: Radical and Racist," The Atlantic Monthly, vol. 278 (October 1996), 53-74, and O'Brien, The Long Affair: Thomas Jefferson and the French Revolution, 1785-1800 (Chicago, 1996), which declares Jefferson a "more suitable… patron of white supremacists" and the "most ferocious" and "militant extremists" of the far right "than of modern American liberals." (321-22). For reflections on Jefferson's declining modern reputation among professional historians, see Peter S. Onuf, "The Scholars' Jefferson," WMQ, 50 (1993), 671-99; and Francis Cogliano, Thomas Jefferson: Reputation and Legacy (Charlottesville, 2006).

And yet Jefferson's name belongs in that book, and not just for the usually agreed-upon reasons: that his "magical" words belie his lifestyle and provide a rhetorical touchstone toward which all movements to make American democracy more inclusive have nodded.[9] What ultimately makes Jefferson a "democrat" in his day, and ours, is his willingness to trust the political and moral instincts of the American public, and, by theoretical extension, the democratic element in any properly constituted political community – however unfortunately circumscribed by race and gender his definition was – in a way that few political theorists before or since have done. By the late eighteenth-century, J. R. Pole reminds us, government had long been considered "too important a matter to be entrusted to the people."[10] Yet, Jefferson shared little of the distrust of the "democracy" that had characterized political theory and statesmanship over the centuries.[11] As he told William Johnson in 1823 – and he never seemed to tire of

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[9] For Jefferson as magician, see Joseph Ellis, American Sphinx: The Character of Thomas Jefferson, 10. For a Jefferson, the national (and international) significance of whose words transcend his specific historical limitations, see Joyce Appleby, "Jefferson and his Complex Legacy," in Peter S. Onuf, ed., Jeffersonian Legacies (Charlottesville, 1993), 1-16, and Sean Wilentz, "American Historians vs. American Founding Fathers: The Details of Greatness," in New Republic (March 29, 2004).

[10] J. R. Pole, The Gift of Government: Political Responsibility from the English Restoration to American Independence (Athens, 1983), xi. Also see Richard D. Brown, The Strength of a People: The Idea of an Informed Citizenry in America, 1650-1870 (Chapel Hill, 1996), esp. chapter 1. Even the American Revolutionaries failed to agree about "who, precisely, should be informed and what, exactly," they should know (86).

[11] Traditionally used (often negatively) by political thinkers to describe direct citizen participation in government, the word *democracy* over time lost much of this original meaning and became more closely associated with representative republics that were responsive to popular majorities made up of a universally enfranchised citizenry. For important reflections on the meanings of the word in the late eighteenth century, see R.R. Palmer, "Notes on the Use of the Word 'Democracy' 1789-1799," Political Science Quarterly, 68 (June 1953), 203-226. For a critique of the imprecision with which the term has been used to describe the governments of early America, see J.R. Pole, "Historians and the Problem of Early American Democracy," American Historical Review, 67 (April 1962), 626-646. For a brilliant discussion of the confused uses of this term in contemporary political discourse, see Fahreed Zakaria, "The Rise of Illiberal Democracy," Foreign Affairs (November/December 1997). For a helpful discussion of the difficulties of evaluating early American government and institutions in terms of current democratic discourse, see Alan Gibson, Understanding the Founding: The Crucial Questions (Lawrence, 2007), 46-90. For one central aspect of the modern definition of democracy, see Alexander Keyssar, The Right to Vote: The Contested History of Democracy in the United States (New York, 2000). For an open-eyed celebration, see Sean

repeating it -- the main difference between he (and his party) and the Federalists was his willingness to trust the judgment of ordinary citizens. "The cherishment of the people then was our principle, the fear and distrust of them, that of the other party."[12] As John Adams once told him, and as generations of Americans have confirmed, the "foundation" of Jefferson's "Unbounded Popularity" was his "steady defence of democratical Principles."[13]

Adams meant Jefferson no compliment. Throughout their justly fabled correspondence, Adams suggested -- and some historians have echoed him – that Jefferson was naïve and idealistic, at best, and blessedly ignorant or utopian, at worst, with his fundamental trust in the democracy. But Adams misunderstood Jefferson, as we will see, not least because Jefferson's trust was remarkably qualified. Jefferson's embrace of "the people" may have inspired the world – and he hoped it would. But, as in multiple other areas, Jefferson's commitment to universal enlightenment principles in this instance, coexisted with a belief that only the American people were ready for self-government, freed, as they were, he believed, from so many of the limitations traditional theorists had placed on the democracy (and which still applied, he feared, to most other peoples on the earth). In other words, there was, he believed, a sociological foundation

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Wilentz, The Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln (New York, 2005). Also see Wilson Carey McWilliams's important reflections in his "Democracy and the Citizen: Community, Dignity, and the Crisis of Contemporary Politics in America," in Robert A. Goldwin and William A. Schambra, eds., *How Democratic is the Constitution?* (Washington and London, 1980), 79-101. In any discussion of the remarkable growth of democracy, we should always keep in mind that whatever else it was, democracy in early America was so sharply circumscribed that it is always fair (if not elegant) to qualify it by the modifiers, "white" and "male."

[12] To Judge William Johnson, June 12, 1823, in Andrew A. Lipscomb, and Albert Ellery Bergh, eds., The Writings of Thomas Jefferson: Memorial Edition, 20 vols. (Washington, D.C., 1903), 15: 442, hereinafter cited as L&B.

[13] John Adams to TJ, in Lester J. Cappon, The Adams-Jefferson Letters: the Complete Correspondence between Thomas Jefferson & Abigail & John Adams (Chapel Hill, 1987), 356, hereinafter cited as AJL.

for his optimism about Americans – rather than merely an idealistic one. "Popular taste," as Joyce Appleby has so nicely put it, may have been "the final arbiter for Jefferson," but the taste he valued was one that demanded a certain cultivation – a cultivation that only Americans had experienced.[14] It was not just any popular taste that Jefferson considered authoritative, then, but one alert, deeply informed, and shaped by an unhindered moral sense; *and* one that reached certain enlightened conclusions.[15] What is perhaps most striking about Jefferson's democratic instincts is how intimately linked they were with a faith in the *peculiar* ability of a *particular* people -- the American people -- to arrive at truth and govern themselves. What distinguished Jefferson and the Republicans, he insisted, was their belief that Americans, "enjoying in ease and security the full fruits of their own industry, enlisted by all their interests on the side of law and order, habituated to think for themselves, and to follow their reason as their guide, would be more easily and safely governed, than with minds nourished in error, and vitiated and debased, as in Europe, by ignorance, indigence and oppression."[16] This late statement is consistent with what Jefferson suggested throughout his life-long correspondence and public career: only Americans seemed to be a public sufficiently enlightened to trust. In short, this is yet another case in which Jefferson's nationalism speaks a universal or cosmopolitan language, which, in turn, has long mis-directed our attention to the universal *claims* rather than to the nationalist assumptions on which such claims rested.

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[14] Joyce Appleby, "Commercial Farming and the 'Agrarian Myth' in the Early Republic, Journal of American History, 68 (March 1982), 845.

[15] As Paul A. Rahe points out, though Jefferson was remarkably cavalier about differences in religious opinion, he was much less so about political ideas and commitments. See Rahe, Republics Ancient & Modern: Classical Republicanism and the American Revolution (Chapel Hill, 1992), 706.

[16] TJ to William Johnson, June 12, 1823, L&B 15: 441-42.

Long remembered as a champion of international democracy, Jefferson did, in fact, embrace a faith in the God-given capacity of human beings to live in society and govern themselves.[17] And, to be sure, Jefferson saw the American Revolution as an example to the rest of the world, and hoped that the "ball of liberty" would continue to "roll 'round the globe." But the kind of self-government Americans enjoyed was not as easy as all that.[18] Liberty would come only to "the enlightened part" of the globe, for "light & liberty," Jefferson told Tench Coxe, "go together."[19] The corollary of this point is that without "light" there can be no "liberty." In other words, it is impossible to speak meaningfully of liberty in the absence of capacity for enjoying it.[20] As Jefferson noted in 1805, "the people are the only safe depositories of their own liberty," but those people "are not safe unless enlightened to a certain degree." Even American liberty would be "a short-lived possession unless the mass of the people could be informed to a certain degree."[21]

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[17] See, among multiple other letters, TJ to John Adams, October 14, 1816, in AJL, 492.

[18] See, for example, Jefferson to John Melish, January 13, 1813, in L&B, 13:212; and TJ to Dupont, April 24, 1816, in Dumas Malone, ed., Correspondence between Thomas Jefferson and Pierre Samuel Du Pont de Nemours, 1798-1817 (Boston, 1930), 182. Jefferson told DuPont that they "both consider the people as our children, & love them with parental affection. But you love them as infants whom you are afraid to trust without nurses: and I as adults whom I freely leave to self-government." But this was hardly fair since "the people" Jefferson had just described were fully competent to self-government whereas those DuPont loved were not. This is why Jefferson told DuPont that he was "right in the case referred to you": the South Americans Dupont was considering were, indeed, infants not worthy of trust.

[19] TJ to Tench Coxe, June 1, 1795, in Ford, ed., Federal Edition, 8: 183.

[20] For a fuller exploration of this theme, see Johan N. Neem, "'To diffuse knowledge more generally through the mass of the people': Thomas Jefferson on Individual Freedom and the Redistribution of Knowledge," in Robert M.S. McDonald, ed., Light and Liberty: Thomas Jefferson and the Politics of Knowledge (volume under review at University of Virginia Press), and Neem, "Developing Freedom: Thomas Jefferson, the State, and Human Capacity," unpublished paper in possession of the author.

[21] TJ to Littleton Waller Tazewell, January 5, 1805, in TJW, 1149.

Fortunately, Jefferson believed, the American people had proven themselves sufficiently enlightened to preserve their own liberty. America remained, Jefferson told the citizens of Washington D.C. in 1809, "the sole depository of the sacred fire of freedom and self government."[22] Other nations would "be lighted up" only when and "if" they "shall ever become susceptible to its benign influence." Self-government was the human ideal, but its spread was limited to the capacity of various national communities to handle it. American democracy did not come ready-made for export.

So Jefferson's assertions about America's capacity for self-government partook of and contributed to a larger discourse about American identity and exceptionalism. And like all national discourses, this one was largely congratulatory and self-serving, ignoring, or papering over, the multiple contradictory realities and experiences that failed to align with it (or which might form the basis for an alternate narrative).[23] Despite all the historical inaccuracies to which such discourses are prone, they are worth study precisely because they are, as Tzvetan Todorov reminds us, "events" in their own right, "driving forces of history, and not merely representations."[24] In other words, while this essay makes no definitive claims about the ultimate accuracy of Jefferson's picture of America (though it takes for granted that the social reality *must* have shaped his narrative), it

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[22] TJ to the Citizens of Washington, March 4, 1809, in L&B, 16: 347.

[23] For explorations of this theme, see Homi K. Bhabha, ed., Nation and Narration (New York, 1990), esp. 1-7; and the succinct statement in Jack P. Greene, "Empire and Identity from the Glorious Revolution to the American Revolution," in P. J. Marshall, ed., The Oxford History of the British Empire, vol. 2: The Eighteenth Century (Oxford, 1998), 208. What Jefferson ignored or dismissed in his articulation of the national meaning – the silences or obfuscations -- itself becomes a significant component of the discourse. The historian's job, then, is surely, at least in part, to interrogate and complicate the nationalist narrative of the nation, as well as simply describe it. Limitations of space, however, largely confine this essay to description.

[24] Todorov, On Human Diversity: Nationalism, Racism, and Exoticism in French Thought (Cambridge, Mass., 1993), xiii.

considers a description of the discourse itself a worthwhile exercise. The significance of Jefferson's narrative rests, in part, on its historical capacity to persuade large numbers of Americans (including historians) and, ultimately thereby, to shape the meaning of the nation for many. For it is clear that Jefferson's discourse also produced "practices and politics that" themselves became, over time, constitutive of a certain "social reality" in the early republic, even as it stuffed other practices and "realities" into the national closet.[25]

Jefferson's optimism about democracy was rooted in his sense that the American people possessed an exceptional "spirit" that would both resist tyranny and preserve law and order, as well as a "public opinion" that could be trusted to give energy and direction to government. Jefferson was such an enthusiastic democrat, in other words, largely because he was an American nationalist.[26]

The Trouble with Europe

Much has been made of Jefferson's support of the French Revolution. But Jefferson's enthusiasm for that event was late and short-lived.[27] Prior to 1789, he repeatedly insisted

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[25] Fabián Alejandro Campagne, Homo Catholicus. Homo Superstitiosus. El discurso antisupersticioso en la España de los siglos XV a XVIII (Buenos Aires: Miño y Dávila, 2002), 21-25. I am grateful to Andrew Keitt for translating these pages and sharing them with me.

[26] This paper will concern itself largely with a description of Jefferson's American "spirit." Though closely related, Jefferson's reflections on American "public opinion," and, indeed, what constituted the American "public" for him, will be the subject of an expanded version of this chapter.

[27] For sober assessments, see R. R. Palmer," "the Dubious Democrat: Thomas Jefferson in Bourbon France, *Political Science Quarterly* 72 (September 1957), 388-404; and Lawrence S. Kaplan, *Jefferson and France: An Essay on Politics and Political Ideas* (New Haven, 1967), 27-30; 33-35.

that the French were not ready for self-government; they would do best to settle for a benevolent constitutional monarchy until they were exercised in the habits of self-government. And the convulsions that ended in Terror and, eventually, military dictatorship, only served to confirm his initial warnings and to disappoint deeply the enthusiasm he did experience after 1789.[28] As for the Spanish American republics, which Jefferson welcomed in theory, he never once imagined that they would end in anything other than military despotisms.

The problem in France and Spanish America, as Jefferson explained again and again was that the people there simply did not yet have the capacity for self-government. This was not a statement about any *natural* incapacity. There was nothing inherent in the Spanish or French people that disqualified them for democracy. The opposite is true. Culture, unique historical circumstances, environmental characteristics, but especially, multiple generations of despotic government, and the power of the Catholic Church over the minds of the people, had taken human beings created by God for freedom and self-government, and rendered them incapable of running their own affairs. It was sad, but true. Spanish Americans would gain independence from Spain, and Jefferson wished them well, but he was under no illusion about the possibility for self-government once Spain had fled the hemisphere. "History," he told Baron von Humboldt, "furnishes no

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[28] Jefferson later acknowledged to John Adams that Adams's "prophecies" about the likely outcome of the French Revolution "proved truer than mine." See Jefferson to Adams, January 11, 1816, in AJL, 459. Jefferson's never-wavering identification with republican revolutionaries everywhere intensified considerably as he began to comprehend the beleaguered nature of his own Revolution upon his return home. So his passion for the French Revolution ebbed and flowed with his perceived need for international reinforcement of the meaning of the republican revolution here. It seems hardly coincidental, then, that his enthusiasm for the French peaked in the mid-1790s – the period in which his own take on the American Revolution was most intensely contested – and that it declined markedly with the triumph of his own party, and its interpretation of the meaning of the Revolution. After this, Jefferson typically retreated to his more skeptical pre-1789 stance on the possibilities for – though not his hope of -- revolution elsewhere.

example of a priest-ridden people maintaining a free civil government. This marks the lowest grade of ignorance, of which their civil as well as religious leaders will always avail themselves for their own purposes." In Spanish America, in other words, an elite of priests and aristocrats had for so long held a monopoly over social, cultural, and financial capital, that the people had been rendered incapable of engaging in democratic politics.[29]

So the Spanish American republics "must end in military despotisms," Jefferson said. "The different castes of their inhabitants, their mutual hatreds and jealousies, their profound ignorance and bigotry, will be played off by cunning leaders, and each be made the instrument of enslaving the others."[30] So the real issue was that the people had been "habituated from their infancy to passive submission of body and mind to their kings and priests," and this lethargy and submissive spirit rendered them unqualified "to think and provide for themselves." This naturally made them "instruments… in the hands of" despots.[31] The South Americans certainly had the same *right* to self-government that all people possessed by nature, and all Americans should cheer on their effort. "But the question is not what we wish," Jefferson insisted, "but what is practicable."[32] The real

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[29] See Johann Neem's compelling application of Pierre Bourdieu's description of the various "forms of capital" to Jefferson's thought, in Neem, "Developing Freedom;" and Pierre Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital" in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. John G. Richardson (New York and Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1986), 241-258.

[30] TJ to Baron Alexander Von Humboldt, December 6, 1813, L&B: 14: 21. For his part, John Adams agreed with Jefferson that "a free government and the Roman Catholick religion can never exist together in any nation or Country, and consequently… all projects for reconciling them in old Spain or new are Eutopian, Platonick and chimerical. I have seen such a prostration and prostitution of Human Nature to the Priesthood in old Spain as settled my judgment long ago, and I understand that in new Spain it is still worse, if that is possible," Adams to TJ, February 3, 1821, in AJL, 571. Also see, Adams to TJ, May 19, 1821, ibid., 573; and Adams to TJ, August 15, 1823, ibid., 595. Jefferson and Adams egged each other on in this conviction: see TJ to Adams, September 4, 1823, ibid., 596.

[31] TJ to Adams, September 4, 1823, in ibid., 596.

[32] TJ to Lafayette, May 14, 1817, in L&B, vol. 15: 117.

trouble would not be throwing off external (in this case, Spanish) tyranny. “The dangerous enemy is within their own breasts.”[33] The “ignorance & bigotry of the mass” led Jefferson to “doubt their capacity to understand and to support a free government.”[34] On the contrary, such “Ignorance and superstition” would “chain their minds and bodies under religious and military despotism.” “The degrading ignorance into which their priests and kings have sunk them, has disqualified them from the maintenance or even knowledge of their rights.” So a move straight from such despotism to self-government was unthinkable. Much better, Jefferson argued again and again, for these people to “obtain freedom by degrees only; because that would by degrees bring on light and information, and qualify them to take charge of themselves understandingly.”[35] So, “as their sincere friend and brother,” he urged, not revolution and republicanism, but “an accommodation with the mother country…. until they shall be sufficiently trained by education and habits of freedom to walk safely by themselves.” Only then, Jefferson said, would they be prepared “for complete independence.”[36]

This was exactly the advice Jefferson had offered the French reformers with whom he was associated in the 1780s. The French people wanted liberty, but they lacked the light necessary to maintaining it, so the best they could hope for was a constitutional monarchy. As he told Madison in 1788, "The misfortune” of the French people was “that they are not yet ripe for receiving the blessings to which they are entitled. I doubt, for

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[33] TJ to John Adams, May 17, 1818, in AJL, 524.

[34] To Dupont de Nemours, April 24, 1816, in Malone, ed., Correspondence between Jefferson and Du Pont, 186.

[35] TJ to John Adams, May 17, 1818, in AJL, 524.

[36] TJ to Lafayette, May 14, 1817, in L&B, vol. 15: 117; TJ to John Adams, January 22, 1821, in AJL, 570.

instance, whether the body of the nation, if they could be consulted, would accept of a Habeas corpus law, if offered them by the king. If the Etats generaux, when they assemble, do not aim at too much, they may begin a good constitution... If they push at much more, all may fail."[37] The French, like the South Americans, had the same rights as other peoples to self-government and liberty. Jefferson's concern was that neither of them had the necessary character, manners, and spirit to maintain those blessings.

Looking back years later, Jefferson believed his initial instincts had been right. Having lived through Robespierre and Bonaparte, the French people were now, in 1815, back to their "ante-revolutionary condition…. nearly where [they] were at the *Jeu de paume* on the 20th of June 1789."[38] The point was, Jefferson told Du Pont, "the excellence of every government is it's adaptation to the state of those to be governed by it." In other words, the worth of a government can be judged by how adequately it matches the propensities of its people. Americans, Jefferson noted, were "constitutionally & conscientiously Democrats," so they could handle the maximum amount of liberty. Until other national peoples met this standard, their rightful share of liberty would need to be tempered by more heavy-handed government than Jefferson usually advocated.[39] If "an unprepared people" acquired freedom "by mere force or accident" (instead of through long "habituation" and "growth in the progress of reason"), they would immediately pervert their freedom into "a tyranny still, of the many, the few,

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[37] TJ to Madison, Nov. 18, 1788, TJP, vol. 12: 188-189. On this sentiment also see TJ to John Jay, Nov. 19, 1788, ibid., 212-213; and TJ to John Adams, November 13, 1787, AJL, 211-213.

[38] Jefferson to Du Pont de Nemours, February 28, 1815, and April 15, 1811, in Malone, ed., Correspondence between Jefferson and Du Pont, 151, 132. For the same sentiment, see TJ to Lafayette, February 14, 1815, in L&B, vol. 14: 245-46.

[39] Jefferson to Du Pont de Nemours, April 24, 1816, in Malone, ed., Correspondence between Jefferson and Du Pont, 181.

or the one."[40] The constitutional monarchies he was recommending for the French and for Latin Americans was "not the best possible government," Jefferson admitted, "but the best" such degraded peoples could "bear."[41]

Interestingly enough, as the critic of other societies, Jefferson ended up sounding a good deal like Emerson's "conservative" who concludes that "the order of things is as good as the character of the population permits."[42] It was only when he turned to America that he saw the possibilities for what J.R. Pole has called a "politics of vigilance" which presupposed a knowledge of public affairs that legitimated the people's engagement without at the same time countenancing the anarchy so feared by Burkean conservatives who typically favored what Pole calls a "politics of trust."[43] Jefferson's instincts were remarkably conservative, then, when it came to evaluating other societies. What made

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[40] TJ to Lafayette, February 14, 1815, in L&B, vol. 14: 245-46.

[41] Ibid., 187. Jefferson recognized – and acknowledged – that the American Revolution had thrown off an external tyranny that, for all its faults, had nevertheless (largely through what Edmund Burke called "salutary and benign neglect") left Americans a heritage of liberty and a history of self-government. This is possibly why Jefferson noted during his retirement, that other than the Americans, only the English people were "capable of bearing a considerable portion of liberty," precisely because of their "habits of law and order" and "almost innate" grasp "of the vital elements of free government." A reformation of government along the American "model," Jefferson argued, could be much more easily realized in England than in other parts of the world, he thought, precisely because of this character of the English people. And if they did institute a government which would "treat us with justice and equality," Jefferson declared that he would "feel with great strength the ties which bind us together, o[u?]r origin, language, laws and manners." The two nations were really "natural friends and brethren," and Americans were "more interested in a fraternal connection with them than with any other nation on earth" (TJ to John Adams, November 25, 1816, in AJL, 497-498). It is impossible to know what impression such an anglophile-like statement from Jefferson would have made on Alexander Hamilton, had he lived to read it, and, for his part, John Adams quickly dismissed such effusive hopes: "Britain will never be our Friend, till We are her Master" (Adams to Jefferson, December 16, 1816, *ibid*., 502). But the central point here is clear. People with long-ingrained habits of self-government and an ability to handle liberty without running into anarchy were the only ones who were realistically eligible for democracy. On this heritage of English liberty as understood in America on the eve of the Revolution, see Bernard Bailyn, The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution (Cambridge, MA, 1967), 66.

[42] "The Conservative," in Joel Porte, ed., Emerson: Essays and Poems (New York, 1996), 182.

[43] Pole, Gift of Government, 140.

him a radical democrat – the basis for his radical politics, in other words – was his American exceptionalism.

Even the ancient models he had long valued fell far short of Jefferson's ideal. The "good government" of republican Rome, Jefferson suggested to John Adams, was largely mythological. "When the enthusiasm however kindled by Cicero's pen and principles, subsides into cool reflection, I ask myself What was that government which the virtues of Cicero were so zealous to restore, and the ambition of Caesar to subvert?" The fact was, he argued, "they never had" any good government that might be worth restoring. Rome's people "were so demoralized and depraved as to be incapable of exercising a wholesome controul" over their government. "If Caesar had been as virtuous as he was daring and sagacious," it was doubtful he could have done much with such people. "Steeped in corruption vice and venality as the whole nation was… what could even Cicero, Cato, Brutus have done, had it been referred to them to establish a good government for their country?" The people needed deep training to understand "what is right and what wrong," and long inculcation "in habits of virtue," to "render" them "a sure basis for the structure of order and good government." But such habituation would take "a generation or two at least" to accomplish, and in that time multiple "Neros and Commoduses" would have arisen to "quash… the whole process." The fact was, the Roman people had "never… known to this day, and through a course of five and twenty hundred years… one single day of free and rational government."[44]

[44] TJ to Adams, December 10, 1819, in AJL, 549-550.

Jefferson and American "spirit"

Americans, by contrast, had "sucked in the principles of liberty as it were with their mother's milk."[45] American republicanism was located "not in our constitution," but "in the spirit of our people." And this American spirit, Jefferson asserted in a remarkable statement, "would oblige even a despot to govern us republicanly."[46] The character of the American people, in other words, would force even tyrants to abide by republican principles if they ever hoped to govern Americans.[47]

In an earlier iteration of this view, Jefferson told William Carmichael, American minister to Spain, during a war scare in 1790, that Spain would never be able to control America's western citizens. These "could be quiet but a short time under a government so repugnant to their feelings." Even if the Spanish managed to control the American West for a time, these Americans "would communicate a spirit of Independence to those with whom they should be mixed" – the contagion of the American "spirit," in other words, would infect even the conquerors of American physical space.[48] The American people, Jefferson asserted over and again, would not long suffer a government that did

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[45] TJ to Richard Price, August 7, 1785, in Ford, ed., *Federal Edition*, vol. 4: 448.

[46] TJ to Samuel Kercheval, July 12, 1816, L&B 15: 35.

[47] It is instructive to compare Jefferson's assertion with Fred Anderson's discussion of the volunteerist assumptions of Massachusetts soldiers during the Seven-Years War, who more or less forced British superiors to alter their approach to dealing with enlisted men (from Massachusetts, anyway). Anderson (like Jefferson) rests a good deal of explanatory power on the free-hold independence of these soldiers who, consequently, understood their relationship with superior officers as a contractual one. Anderson, A People's Army: Massachusetts Soldiers and Society in the Seven-Years War (Chapel Hill, 1984).

[48] Jefferson to William Carmichael, August 2 1790, *PTJ,* 17: 114. These quotations come from Jefferson's Outline of Policy on the Mississippi Question, which he enclosed in the letter.

not ascend from their will; nor could they abide a government so inconsistent with their republican character.

Years later, when he read John Marshall's *Life of Washington*, which praised the General for resigning his commission and refusing to "perpetuate... his authority," Jefferson suggested that even if Washington *had* desired to translate his military authority into a political tyranny, the American people would never have allowed it.[49] "He who supposes it was practicable, had [Washington] wished it, knows nothing of the spirit of America, either of the people or of those who possessed their confidence."[50] And this "spirit of America," Jefferson told Madison, would strengthen with time. "The rising race [of Americans] are all republicans. We [of the revolutionary generation] were educated in royalism; no wonder if some of us retain that idolatry still. Our young people are educated in republicanism, an apostasy from that to royalism is unprecedented & impossible."[51] Just as oil and water will not mix, just as the princess will always sense the pea under the mattress, true Americans will be unable to adjust to or become complaisant under despotic government. The character of Americans – not simply their institutions – would preserve the republic.

The French Revolution had failed, by contrast, Jefferson came to believe, because it depended largely on "the mobs of the cities," a people "debased by ignorance, poverty

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[49] Marshall, *The Life of George Washington, Commander in Chief of the American Forces, During the War which established the independence of his country, and First President of the United States,* 5 volumes (Philadelphia: C.P. Wayne, 1807), 2.

[50] Jefferson's notes on the fifth volume of Marshall's *Life of Washington*: *WTJ*, 9: 262. Charles Royster makes a similar assertion in *A Revolutionary People at War: The Continental Army and American Character* (Chapel Hill, 1979), 257.

[51] Jefferson to Madison, March 15, 1789, *WTJ,* 5:83.

and vice." Such people simply "could not be restrained to rational action."[52] But in America, he asserted, "the proper spirit of the people" would shape the behavior of even an "absolute Monarch" as long as "our present character remains, of order, industry and love of peace."[53] If the Roman people (or, by extension, the French) "had been, like ours, enlightened, peaceable, and really free," Jefferson argued, they might have obtained good government, too. The names of Caesar and Nero just might have remained unknown to history.[54]

Public spirit for Jefferson essentially connoted the *engagement* of the American people.[55] And engagement seemed to mean two things, primarily. One, that Americans were alert and informed enough to recognize, and courageous enough to resist, tyranny when it appeared in whatever guise. Two, that Americans were devoted to law and order and to preservation of their Union and system of government. These two facets of public spirit seem in tension: one is the "spirit of resistance" to government; the other is a devotion to law and obedience to constituted authority. But they are clearly complementary in Jefferson's thought.

Jefferson's confidence in the American people was rooted in his sense that they were exceptional. "Never was a finer canvas presented to work on than our countrymen" he effused to John Adams in 1796 in a letter in which he spelled out some of the

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[52] TJ to John Adams, October 28, 1813, in AJL, 391.

[53] TJ to John Taylor, May 28, 1816, L&B 15: 22.

[54] TJ to John Adams, December 10, 1819, in AJL, 549.

[55] It seems worth noting that this spirit also suggests a certain spunk. Americans were the kind of people who would consider it a "duty to buy a copy" of a censored or "persecuted" book just to vindicate their "right to buy, and to read what [they] please..." America was "a country which is afraid to read nothing, and which may be trusted with anything, so long as its reason remains unfettered by law," TJ to Monsieur N.G. Dufief, April 19, 1814, in L&B, vol. 14: 127; and TJ to Joseph Milligan, April 6, 1816, *ibid*., 463.

characteristics which rendered Americans uniquely able to govern themselves. "All" Americans, he said, were "engaged in agriculture or the pursuits of honest industry, independent in their circumstances, enlightened as to their rights, and firm in their habits of order and obedience to the laws." The lesson was clear: "If ever the morals of a people could be made the basis of their own government, it is our case."[56] In America, he told Adams years later, "every one may have land to labor for himself if he chuses; or, preferring the exercise of any other industry, may exact for it such compensation as not only to afford a comfortable subsistence, but wherewith to provide for a cessation from labor in old age." It followed, Jefferson noted, that "Every one, by his property, or by his satisfactory situation, is interested in the support of law and order. And such men 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 to the demolition and destruction of every thing public and private. The history of the last 25 years of France," Jefferson asserted, "and of the last 40 years in America, nay of it's last 200 years, proves the truth of both parts of this observation."[57]

Here, and elsewhere, Jefferson made several striking claims about the United States. First is his claim of its unique prosperity. Because of the "immensity of land" in the United States, Americans were "a people at their ease," in possession of a "lovely equality," in which most families, by and large, were not artificially burdened with

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[56] TJ to John Adams, February 28, 1796, in AJL, 260.

[57] TJ to John Adams, October 28, 1813, in ibid., 391.

poverty, where the agricultural labor of men was sustaining and even profitable.[58] America was essentially a classless society, Jefferson told Thomas Cooper, with "no paupers," and very few rich.[59] All Americans worked and all maintained a comfortable competence. This generalized prosperity had important consequences, not least of which, as we will see, was a peculiar disposition in favor of law and order. But it also created a kind of rough equality which freed people up to achieve their natural human potential and to indulge their independence, following a moral sense unclouded by artificial hierarchies or crushing dependence. Two hundred years' experience with this kind of freedom rendered Americans familiar with the habits of self-government and comfortable, as well as safe, with their liberty.[60] In addition, American prosperity underwrote American domestic happiness, freeing men and women to enact their natural gender roles and create

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[58] TJ, Notes on the State of Virginia, ed. William Peden (Chapel Hill, 1954), 164 (hereinafter cited as Notes); TJ to Maria Cosway, October 12, 1786, in TJP, 10: 448. This theme of unusually widespread prosperity is as old as the idea of America and remains a prominent component in contemporary American exceptionalism. See Jack P. Greene, The Intellectual Construction of America: Exceptionalism and Identity from 1492 to 1800 (Chapel Hill, 1993); and David M. Potter, People of Plenty: Economic Abundance and the American Character (Chicago, 1954). For an effort to quantify American prosperity and social mobility in the late eighteenth-century, see Jackson Turner Main, The Social Structure of Revolutionary America (Princeton, 1965).

[59] To Thomas Cooper, September 10, 1814, L&B 14: 182. Also see, Notes, 133.

[60] It seems worth noting that these claims about the colonial period conflict with some of Jefferson's other suggestions that the Revolution had destroyed a deferential, hierarchical, monarchical society. The historiography surrounding these competing claims is rich, and no less contentious. See Jack P. Greene, Pursuits of Happiness: The Social Development of Early Modern British Colonies and the Formation of American Culture (Chapel Hill, 1988), and Intellectual Construction of America; Alfred Young, "George Robert Twelves Hewes (1742-1840): A Boston Shoemaker and the Memory of the American Revolution," WMQ 38 (October 1981), 561-623; Holly Brewer, "Entailing Aristocracy in Colonial Virginia: 'Ancient Feudal Restraints' and Revolutionary Reform," WMQ (April 1997), 307-346; Jon Butler, Becoming America: The Revolution before 1776 (Cambridge, MA, 2001); Joyce Appleby, Inheriting the Revolution: The First Generation of Americans (Cambridge, MA, 2001); Gordon Wood, The Radicalism of the American Revolution (New York, 1991); and Richard R. Beeman, "Deference, Republicanism, and the Emergence of Popular Politics in Eighteenth-Century America," WMQ, 49 (July 1992), 401-430. In any case, this association of America with freedom was never "merely a parochial view," as Bernard Bailyn has noted, but was "reinforced" by Enlightenment figures who identified America as the "special preserve… of virtue and liberty," Bailyn, Ideological Origins, 84.

the stable foundation of self-government in the republican family.[61] In short, American circumstances had forged a people safe with the franchise and with a degree of liberty unknown in the history of the world: "men susceptible of happiness, educated in the love of order, habituated to self-government, and valuing its blessings above all price."[62]

All of these characteristics were easy to contrast with those of Europe. Since Europeans were "not at their ease," Jefferson argued, they lived degraded lives.[63] Every man in Europe, Jefferson argued, was "either the hammer or the anvil."[64] And European aristocracy created artificial hierarchies that stifled human potential and condemned the mass of society to ignorance and poverty, leaving them without a true stake in the society or any public spirit that might preserve republican government.

It seems worth noting here that the claims Jefferson was making about America were not original or unique to him, though he articulated them as well or better than anyone else ever did. As Jack Greene has shown, America's association with prosperity, mild government fostering individual private pursuits of betterment and happiness, remarkable fluidity and comparative social mobility – all of which, the narrative went, cultivated a unique character in the American people -- had been part of the European conception of America from the time it first entered the "Old World's" consciousness.[65]

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[61] For reflections on this theme, see Brian Steele, "Thomas Jefferson's Gender Frontier," Journal of American History, vol. 95 (June 2008), 17-42.

[62] First Annual Message, December 8, 1801, in TJW, 503.

[63] "Notes of a Tour Through Holland and the Rhine Valley," TJP, 13: 27-28; 36, n. 29, emphasis added.

[64] TJ to Charles Bellini, September 30, 1785, TJP, 8: 568.

[65] Greene, Intellectual Construction of America. Greene, in Pursuits of Happiness, argues that this "intellectual construction" more or less reflected American reality and that American visions of the "good life" were bound up with "unrestrained" material acquisition. Also see Greene's review of Main, Social Structure of Revolutionary America in Political Science Quarterly 81 (December 1966), 646-49, esp. 648-49 (quotation on 648).

Adam Smith himself gave his seal of approval to this view, praising the American farmer "who cultivates his own land, and derives his necessary subsistence from the labour of his own family." Such a yeoman, Smith reported, considered himself "really a master, and independent of all the world" – with some qualification, precisely the kind of condition Jefferson believed fostered the unique American spirit. In contrast, Smith noted in a familiar passage from the *Wealth of Nations*, the laborer in Europe, where land was scarce and the division of labor had advanced to a much more considerable extent, spent his "whole life… performing a few simple operations," and consequently, had "no occasion to exert his understanding or to exercise his invention in finding out expedients for removing difficulties which never occur." Such a laborer "naturally loses, therefore, the habit of such exertion, and generally becomes as stupid and ignorant as it is possible for a human creature to become. The torpor of his mind renders him, not only incapable of relishing or bearing a part in any rational conversation, but of conceiving any generous, noble, or tender sentiment, and consequently of forming any just judgment concerning many even of the ordinary duties of private life." Perhaps most damning here, from Jefferson's perspective, was that such a worker was soon rendered "altogether incapable of judging… the great and extensive interests of his country; and unless very particular pains have been taken to render him otherwise, he is equally incapable of defending his country in war." "In every improved and civilized society," Smith wrote, "this is the state into which the labouring poor, that is, the great body of the people, must necessarily fall, unless government takes some aims to prevent it."[66]

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[66] Adam Smith, The Wealth of Nations, in Robert L. Heilbroner, ed., The Essential Adam Smith (New York, 1986), 250-251; 302.

Lest the point here be misunderstood, it seems worth reiterating that Jefferson continued to hold out hope – it might be more accurate to call his attitude on this issue "faith" -- that liberty would eventually spread around the globe. Unlike later manifestations of it, Jefferson's American exceptionalism was not ultimately exclusive or coextensive with a desire to hoard liberty for America. On the contrary, Jefferson seemed compelled by observation to consider America the only living example of the kind of society he craved for the rest of the world. In his final letter, he offered a ringing endorsement of the right of all peoples to self-government, a reformulation of what he had long been telling multiple correspondents – even those to whom he had expressed doubts about the ability of other contemporary peoples to handle republicanism – that one day, the world would be made of republics.[67] "Opinion is power," he told Adams earlier, "and that opinion will come. Even France will yet attain representative government." But he did not expect to see this happen during his own lifetime and he predicted that "rivers of blood may yet flow" before it was realized.[68]

The contrast between these real, but distant, hopes for the world, and his confident assertions about the present character of the United States are striking. The American example to the world was also the only actual example encouraging Jefferson's hope that all "men" would one day "burst the chains under which monkish ignorance and superstition had persuaded them to bind themselves, and to assume the blessings and security of self-government."[69]

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[67] TJ to Roger C. Weightman, June 24, 1826, in TJW, 1517.

[68] TJ to John Adams, January 11, 1816, in AJL, 460.

[69] TJ to Roger C. Weightman, June 24, 1826, in TJW, 1517.

Dreams were for the future; practical politics today demanded an appreciation of reality. Or, as Jefferson put it to Madison, it is not "advantageous" for men to create governments when they are "acquainted with man only as they see him in their books and not in the world."[70] So for now, appropriate government had to be tailored to fit the character of its people rather than any universal theory of man. As Jefferson told William Lee, "every people have their own particular habits, ways of thinking, manners, etc., which have grown up with them from their infancy, are become a part of their nature, and to which the regulations which are to make them happy must be accommodated." Unfortunately, Jefferson said, "no member of a foreign country can have a sufficient sympathy with these. The institutions of Lycurgeus, for example would not have suited Athens nor those of Solon Lacedaemon. The organizations of Locke were impracticable for Carolina, and those of Rousseau and Mably for Poland."[71] If the question was whether to "mould our citizens to the law, or the law to our citizens," Jefferson largely came down on the side of the latter. Any fair answer to this question, he told John Quincy Adams, could not neglect the "peculiar character" of the American citizenry.[72]

Accordingly, one of Jefferson's principal critiques of the Federalists in the 1790s was that they were attempting to force upon Americans a style of government ready-made for the European societies he described, but ill-suited for the American people. Part of the reason the Federalists governed with a heavy hand, hoping, Jefferson imagined, to consolidate power in the central state and create a more authoritarian system of

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[70] TJ to Madison, August 28, 1789, in ROL, 1: 628.

[71] TJ to William Lee, January 16, 1817, in L&B, 15: 100-101.

[72] To John Quincy Adams, November 1, 1817, L&B 15: 145.

government for America was that they did not understand "the difference between the rabble who were used as instruments" for the French revolutionaries, "and the steady & rational character of the American people, in which [they] had not sufficient confidence." "Like the rest of mankind," the Federalists were justifiably "disgusted with atrocities of the French revolution," but, unlike the Republicans, they forgot about the unique spirit of the American people.[73] Jefferson tellingly characterized his own election as "the resistance which our republic has opposed to a course of operation *for which it was not destined*." His victory, he wrote, had proven "a strength of body which affords the most flattering presages of duration…. the character which our fellow citizens have displayed on this occasion gives us every thing to hope for the permanence of our government."[74] No useful positive lessons for Americans, in fact, could be drawn from the experiences of the peoples of history. Seeking precedents for proper governance from ancient Rome, "where the government was of a heavy-handed unfeeling aristocracy, over a people ferocious, and rendered desperate by poverty and wretchedness," would be folly and "misapplied… to a people, mild in their dispositions, patient under their trial, united for the public liberty, and affectionate to their leaders."[75] The most salient difference between Jefferson and the Federalists, then, by Jefferson's own reckoning here, was not his "utopianism" about world-wide democracy and revolution so lampooned in Federalist campaign literature, but, rather, his sense that Americans had, in fact, shrugged off the fetters that still bound the majority of the world's peoples – of necessity – to governments

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[73] The Anas, in Ford, ed., Federal Edition, vol. 1: 183.

[74] To James Warren, March 21, 1801, TJP 33: 398-99, emphasis added.

[75] Notes, 129. It seems worth noting that Jefferson's rejection of classical models here implies their necessity for ancient people even as it denies their appropriateness for Americans, whose capacity for self-government rendered the austerity of the ancient models outmoded in the 19th century USA.

of hierarchy, deference, and force. In their attempt to govern such a people with the tools that had served rulers of the European past, Federalists were simply out of date (and touch) with American realities.

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Jefferson's Americans, then, maintained an alert "spirit of resistance" to tyranny that was uncharacteristic of the lethargic, ignorant, poverty stricken-masses in other nations. The corollary to this spirit was the American habit of "order and obedience to the laws."[76] The paradox is more apparent than real. For Jefferson, these were different manifestations of a single spirit. American "love of liberty," its "steady character," was manifested in both the spirit of resistance to tyranny and its complement, "obedience to law, and support of the public authorities." In both, Jefferson recognized "a sure guaranty of the permanence of our republic."[77] This dualistic American spirit, he believed, had equipped the American people to meet various kinds of challenges to the nation.

Jefferson first became infatuated with this phenomenon during Shays's Rebellion. Europeans expecting anarchy in governments so democratical were impressed, he said, by "the interposition of the people themselves on the side of government."[78] To a degree largely un-remarked in the scholarly literature, Jefferson's confidence about the

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[76] TJ to John Adams, February 28, 1786, in TJP 28: 618.

[77] Eighth Annual Message, November 8, 1808, in TJW, 549.

[78] TJ to Edward Carrington, January 16, 1787, TJP 11: 49.

American experiment began with Shays. Not his commitment to self-government which he believed to be a natural God-given human right, but his sense that things were going to work out right. In the early 1780s, Jefferson had expressed anxiety about the ability of Americans to maintain their republics. In his Notes on the State of Virginia, Jefferson noted that it was the "manners and spirit of a people which preserve a republic in vigor."[79] But in the previous two sections, Jefferson had suggested that the "spirit of the people" might not be "an infallible, a permanent reliance." In fact, the "spirit of the times may alter, will alter. Our rulers will become corrupt, our people careless." After the Revolution, Jefferson expected things to go "down hill." "Human nature," Jefferson asserted, "is the same on every side of the Atlantic." It would not be unexpected for American political leaders to soon become enamored with the trappings of power. The people, he feared, would soon "forget themselves, but in the sole faculty of making money, and will never think of uniting to effect a due respect for their rights."[80]

Of course, Jefferson may have been posturing for effect. In promoting his bill for religious freedom, he may have hoped to frighten lawmakers into creating reforms and institutions that would preserve liberty in the absence, if necessary, of public spirit in the people. But there is no reason to think that Jefferson did not on some important level genuinely fear this possible trajectory.

And if it was, in fact, the "manners and spirit of a people which preserve a republic in vigor," the next section of the *Notes* was even more frightening. It does not seem an accident that Jefferson chose the query about American "manners" to address

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[79] Notes, 165.

[80] Ibid., 161, 121.

slavery in Virginia. Much can be and has been written on this short but deeply emotional passage, but what seems most striking about it in this context is how clearly Jefferson suggests that slavery more or less undermined everything he considered exceptional and superior about America. Slavery fostered and cultivated a hereditary aristocracy with its attendant habits of tyranny, crushing rights, perverting morals, discouraging industry, and undermining love of country.[81] Read together, these sections of the *Notes* form a depressing picture of the future of the United States – particularly in terms of developing a public spirit sufficient to maintain republican government and rights. Here in the Notes, accordingly, Jefferson placed a good deal of hope in the efficacy of institutions to check a declining character in the public and its leaders. Because the spirit manifested during the Revolution might be ephemeral, and since the manners (of Virginians, anyway) were already suspect because of the very presence of slavery, institutional checks and balances seemed a proper remedy. "Better to keep the wolf out of the fold, than to trust to drawing his teeth and talons after he shall have entered." Surely "the time to guard against corruption and tyranny," then, "is before they shall have gotten hold on us."[82] Certainly it is not entirely inaccurate to suggest, as Lorraine Smith Pangle and Thomas Pangle have written, that Jefferson eventually "placed relatively little faith in institutional structures to preserve freedom," which is why, they suggest, he "took more

[81] It seems not improper, in this context, to note James Madison's extraordinarily honest and revealing (though never published in his lifetime) look at the relationship between slavery and the government of Virginia: "In proportion as slavery prevails in a State, the Government, however democratic in name, must be aristocratic in fact…. The Southern States of America, are on the same principle aristocracies." See Madison, "Notes for the National Gazette Essays" [ca. 19 December 1791 – 3 March 1792], in The Papers of James Madison, ed., William T. Hutchinson et. al (Chicago, Charlottesville, 1962 --), vol. 14: 163-164.

[82] Notes, 121.

seriously than most the education and moral temper of the citizens."[83] But Jefferson's commitment to institutions as a check on human propensities was deeper than the Pangles suggest, and, combined with his concerns about the Virginia Constitution and his fears that it had laid the groundwork for legislative despotism, these sections of the *Notes* suggest an early anxiety about American character that historians typically do not associate with Jefferson.[84]

Jefferson's ordinarily effusive optimism about the American future struggled, during these years, with a collective post-Revolutionary fear that Americans lacked the virtue requisite to the maintenance of self-government – a fear that Jefferson seemed at times to share.[85] But Shays's Rebellion – which only confirmed such fears for so many American leaders – perversely appears to have done something extraordinary for Jefferson's confidence. Even as it drove most American leaders to embrace institutional checks on the public, Shays', by contrast, infused Jefferson with a new confidence in the *character* of the American people and partially checked the resort to institutions he had encouraged in the *Notes*.[86] John Jay's letter informing him of the turbulence in Massachusetts "really affected me," he said, largely because Jay suggested that concerns about anarchy were leading people to look to more authoritarian structures to maintain

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[83] Though even this point seems to exaggerate Jefferson's dismissal of institutional efficacy. Pangle and Pangle, The Learning of Liberty: The Educational Ideas of the American Founders (Lawrence, 1993), 106.

[84] Notes, 120.

[85] See Gordon S. Wood, The Creation of the American Republic (Chapel Hill, 1969), 97-114, 413-25; Richard L. Bushman, The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities (New York, 1992), 186-203.

[86] I do not mean to suggest here that Jefferson ever lost his commitment to checks and balances or his concern that power was corrupting. On the contrary, he understood that even his "natural aristocracy" could become a pack of "wolves," if left without oversight. What he did seem to embrace – to a degree that John Adams and many later historians find laughable – was the idea that the spirit of the public would prove itself an efficacious, if not entirely sufficient, check on both tyranny from above and anarchy from below.

order: the "rational and well-intentioned," and "more sober part of the people," Jay wrote, in their quest for "for Peace and Security," might even consider monarchy.[87] But a disarming letter from John Adams quickly restored his faith.[88] From then on, Jefferson seemed unconcerned, even nonchalant about Shays's, telling some alarmed correspondents not to worry, that "a little rebellion now and then" was a sign of public health: "I like to see the people awake and alert."[89] He was now "persuaded," he wrote, "that the good sense of the people will always be found to be the best army."[90]

The lesson Jefferson ultimately took from Shays was twofold: one, that the American people were not lethargic but could be counted upon to sense and resist tyranny in their government should such arise. Two, that the American people could be counted upon to defend their republics when unlawful threats to them appeared. This only seems paradoxical or contradictory. Jefferson believed the spirit of the rebels was to be cherished, even when it was dead wrong, precisely because it would keep the government honest and good. But what was really great about the Shays story, Jefferson thought, was that the common sense of the people had intervened to *defuse* the rebellion. The ultimate outcome of Shays's uprising, in fact, was "confidence in the firmness of our governments" because of the "interposition of the people themselves *on the side of*

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[87] John Jay to TJ, October 27, 1786, TJP, 10: 488-489. For calls for the establishment of monarchy in Massachusetts, see Szatmary, Shays'Rebellion, 81-82.

[88] John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, November 30, 1786, in TJP., 10: 557.

[89] To Abigail Adams, February 22, 1787, ibid., 11: 174; To Abigail Adams, December 21, 1786, ibid., 10: 621. Also see TJ to Ezra Stiles, December 24, 1786, ibid. 10: 629.

[90] TJ to Edward Carrington, January 16, 1787, ibid., 11: 49.

government."[91] Shays's was ultimately pacified in large part, Jefferson believed, because of the "discretion which the malcontents still preserved" – itself a telling sign of the nature of American public spirit. But similarly "tumultuous meetings" in Connecticut and New Hampshire ended because "the body of the people rose in support of government and obliged the malcontents to go to their homes."[92] Jefferson's endorsement of the people's attention to public affairs, on both sides of the issue – the public spirit of the rebels (misinformed though it was) *and* the public spirit of those who supported law and order – is a nice window into Jefferson's conception of the dual nature of the American spirit.

Shays's Rebellion gave Jefferson "no uneasiness" for a variety of reasons: from the vantage point of despotic Europe, a bit of resistance to authority looked positively refreshing to him.[93] And the reports he had generally assured him that the "rebellion" was a misconceived (though somewhat justifiable) expression of discontent, rather than a full-scale assault on the constituted institutions of society.[94] "No injury was done," he noted, "in a single instance to the person or property of any one." The rebellion lasted, he said, less than 24 hours and ended largely because the "rebels" had enough public spirit to

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[91] Ibid., emphasis added. Jefferson never endorsed the "motives" or methods of the insurgents. These, he admitted, were "founded in ignorance," and "produced acts absolutely unjustifiable." TJ to William Stephens Smith, November 13, 1787, in ibid., 12: 356; TJ to Madison, January 30, 1787, ibid., 11: 92.

[92] Jefferson to William Carmichael, December 26, 1786, in ibid., 10: 633. It is not clear that Jefferson's interpretation of the suppression of the rebellion is strictly accurate, but, as he clearly believed it to be so and reiterated it over and again, his view shaped his reading of the events. David Szatmary argues that suppression came largely from the commercial interests and commercialized areas of the state, rather than from "the people" as a whole. For the trajectory of the suppression, see, Szatmary, Shays'Rebellion, esp. 70-119.

[93] Jefferson to James Madison, January 30, 1787, in PTJ., 10: 93.

[94] See, for example, John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, November 30, 1786, in ibid., 10: 557.

back off in the face of majority rejection of their proposals.[95] In Europe, much more "ferocious" insurrections occurred every few years; in Turkey, they "are the events of every day." "Compare," these bloody rebellions, he challenged Madison, with "the order, the moderation and the almost *self extinguishment* of ours."[96]

It is true that Jefferson had no real answer for Madison's concern that the rebels might simply use the next election to "promote their views under the auspices of Constitutional forms," thus becoming a despotic majority rather than a rebellious minority.[97] Jefferson was fully aware that a people's elected legislature could become despotic: the "*elective*" nature of such tyranny would bring little comfort to its victims, he noted, which is why he endorsed a strict separation of powers in the 1780s.[98] He was not simple-minded on that issue. And it is worth reiterating here that Jefferson was never sympathetic to the goals (as opposed to the suffering) of the rebels. The forcible closing of courts and violation of contract was never part of his program. As early as April 1786, after he and John Adams met with a delegation of British merchants to discuss pre-war debts owed to them in the U.S., Jefferson had written Madison that he "wish[ed] extremely" that the states would open the courts to British creditors and institute a

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[95] Jefferson to William Carmichael, December 26, 1786, in ibid., 633.

[96] To Madison, December 20, 1787, ibid., 12: 442, emphasis added. Many years later, Jefferson similarly endorsed popular engagement with an appeal to "experience," challenging critics to "show me where the [American] people have done half the mischief in these forty years, that a single despot would have done in a single year; or show half the riots and rebellions, the crimes and the punishments, which have taken place in any single nation, under kingly government, during the same period," Jefferson to Samuel Kercheval, July 12, 1816, in L&B, 15: 35-36.

[97] Madison to Jefferson, April 23, 1787, in Smith, ed., *Republic of Letters*, vol. 1: 474. Also see the discussion in Wood, *Creation of the American Republic*, 412-13. Madison's fears proved to be largely unfounded, as new governor John Hancock, despite a change in tone, continued to pursue policies friendly to commercial interests. See Szatmary, Shays' Rebellion, 119.

[98] Peden, ed., *Notes*, 120.

program for repayment.[99] Jefferson – though deeply in debt to those very merchants -- acknowledged the justice of the Paris Peace Treaty's provision that American debts be paid in full (though not that of the 5% interest demanded by British merchants), and he never balked, later, at the Constitution's protection of contract and strictures against state issues of paper money.[100] So Jefferson's track record on this score suggests that he agreed with Madison that stay laws were, in fact, as Madison would later put it memorably, "adverse to the rights of other citizens, or to the permanent and aggregate interests of the community."[101]

But he never responded explicitly to this fear of Madison's, perhaps because he was convinced by that point – as he told numerous correspondents -- that the people had already rallied against the rebels in support of government.[102] Perhaps Jefferson's perspective on Shays' Rebellion also can be attributed, at least in part, to his distance from the events at home, which afforded him a kind of respite from Madison's intense concern.

But, one of the idiosyncrasies that ultimately separated Jefferson from his famous contemporaries among the revolutionary "brotherhood," was not – as is commonly supposed -- a lack of commitment to strong government and order but, instead, a willingness to trust the capacity of the American people to preserve order without running headlong into anarchy. Alexander Hamilton, by contrast, was relatively

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[99] Jefferson to Madison, April 25, 1786, in Smith, ed., *Republic of Letters*, vol. 1: 417.

[100] On this subject, see, above all, Herbert Sloan's brilliant discussion in *Principle and Interest: Thomas Jefferson and the Problem of Debt* (Charlottesville, 1995), esp. 32-49.

[101] Madison, "Number 10," in Pole, ed., *Federalist*, 48.

[102] See, for example, Jefferson to William Carmichael, December 26, 1786, *PTJ* 10: 633-34, and to Edward Carrington, January 16, 1787, *PTJ* 11:48-50.

unconcerned about popular lethargy – his political science assumed it, and was not particularly anxious about it.[103] John Adams, on the other hand, did worry about it. Who else but the people could check the unbridled power of the aristocracy? But Adams was not ever able to persuade himself convincingly that the people were capable of overcoming the demagoguery that would be practiced by the aristocracy – and, indeed, Adams's solution was partially to simply run with what he believed to be human nature. As he argued in his *Discourses on Davila*, the cultivation of the aristocracy by titles and emoluments would both attract the natural craving of the aristocracy for distinction (and, thus, harness their talents for use by the state) and reinforce the natural propensity of the populace to fawn and submit to good government.[104] But partly because such an arrangement would leave the people defenseless against "these great families," Adams rested a good deal of his hope for the new republic in a strong executive (leading many, including Jefferson, to mistake him for a monarchist).[105] The point was, Adams noted, that "education, as well as religion, aristocracy, as well as democracy and monarchy, are singly, totally inadequate to the business of restraining the passions of men, of preserving a steady government, and protecting the lives, liberties, and properties of the people." Why? Because "Religion, superstition, oaths, education, laws, all give way before

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[103] See Rahe, Republics Ancient and Modern, 699.

[104] Adams, Discourses on Davila, in John Patrick Diggins, ed., The Portable John Adams (New York, 2004), 350-51, 358-59.

[105] See Richard Alan Ryerson, "John Adams, Republican Monarchist: An Inquiry into the Origins of his Constitutional Thought," in Eliga Gould and Peter S. Onuf, eds., Empire and Nation: The American Revolution in the Atlantic World (Baltimore, 2005), 72-92.

passions, interest, and power, which can be resisted only by passions, interest, and power."[106]

What distinguished Jefferson from either Hamilton or Adams in this regard was that he, like Adams (and unlike Hamilton), valued and hoped for the engagement of the people. But, unlike Adams, Jefferson believed that the American people were uniquely capable of engagement (checking tyranny) *while* preserving order and good government (without running into anarchy). This helps explain his initial response to the Constitution. The Philadelphia Convention, he told William Smith (Adams's son-in-law), had been "too much impressed by the insurrection of Massachusetts: and in the spur of the moment they are setting up a kite to keep the hen-yard in order."[107] This statement has often been understood to signal Jefferson's opposition to a national state, on the one hand, and his celebration of rebellion, on the other. And, of course, in the same letter, Jefferson exclaimed to Smith: "God forbid we should ever be 20 years without such a rebellion." But the key word here is *such*. And this takes us back to Jefferson's interpretation of Shays'. It was clearly misconceived, he tells Smith. But the encouraging thing to Jefferson was that the people had risen up to defend against what they *believed* to be a threat to their liberty.

Popular government was, Jefferson acknowledged, subject to what he admitted to be the "evil" of "turbulence." And while it is certainly true that Jefferson feared quiet slavery ("quietam servitutem") more than tumultuous liberty ("periculosam libertatem"), his choice of evils was made much simpler by his conviction that American popular spirit

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[106] Adams, Defence of the Constitutions of the United States, in Charles Francis Adams, ed., Works of Adams, 4: 557-58.

[107] TJ to Smith, November 13, 1787, TJP, 12: 355-357.

seemed largely limited to the kind of vigilance which was "productive of good:" preventing "the degeneracy of government," and nourishing "a general attention to the public affairs."[108]

Before the Revolution, Jefferson described the Boston Tea Party in just such terms. "There are extraordinary situations which require extraordinary interposition," he wrote in 1774. "An exasperated people, who feel that they possess power, are not easily restrained within limits strictly regular." For Jefferson, this kind of popular action, under the right circumstances – "extraordinary situations" – was a positive force. And, as with Shays', Jefferson believed, the people "out of doors" were, in this instance, remarkably restrained. The destruction of the tea was accompanied without "any other act of violence." The difference, of course, was that in the case of the Tea Party, government response was tyrannical and unrepentant, thus invoking more drastic measures on the part of the people. After all, he wrote, "if the pulse of the people shall beat calmly under this experiment [the Coercive Acts which followed the Tea Party], another and another will be tried, till the measure of despotism be filled up."[109]

But, unlike the Tea Party which had ended in revolution, Jefferson believed that Shays' had been quelled by popular defense of government and order once the people understood the truth about their situation. In other words, the spirit of resistance he so

[108] TJ to Madison, January 30, 1787, in Smith, ed., Republic of Letters, II: 461. This letter speaks a universalist language: "rebellions" are "necessary in the political world" and "nature has formed man" for mild governments. But a close reading suggests that these declarations apply not to people living under "governments of force: as is the case in all other monarchies [excepting England] and in most of the other republics," but to those in two republics only: "England in a slight degree, and in our states in a great one." Only in America (and somewhat less so, in England), in other words, had historical circumstances prepared a people capable of handling republican liberty. For further thoughts on Jefferson's placement of England in this hierarchy, see note 41, above.

[109] TJ, "A Summary View of the Rights of British America," August 1774, in Jack Greene, ed., Colonies to Nation, 232.

"cherish[ed]" had also, in this case, diffused the rebellion and should not, he believed, become an excuse for setting up an unnecessary check on popular spirit which was, after all, he believed, quite capable of righting itself, given adequate and accurate information. The context of Jefferson's letter to Smith – and what sets up his famous "endorsement" of Shays's Rebellion – is his concern about "lies" in the European press "about our being in anarchy." Jefferson wrote Smith to dispel these distortions (or willful misrepresentations), registering his astonishment that even Americans could have come to believe them. The only disturbance he could see was Shays', and history had not produced any other "instance of rebellion so honourably conducted."[110] What kind of rebellion was Shays's? One manifesting the "spirit of resistance," to be sure, but one conducted more or less decently and in order – one that quickly disbursed upon majority rejection of its goals.

This is what Jefferson found so remarkable about the whole thing. Theorists like Adams would continue to wrestle with complex schemes –- checks and balances, powerful executive authority, and the cultivation of a hereditary aristocracy -- to harness the spirit of the people without unleashing its dangerous potential for anarchy. For Jefferson, in the euphoria of the moment, the search seemed largely over by 1787. By then, he had seen enough to convince him that the American people had proven themselves capable of resisting tyranny without running headlong into unnecessary licentiousness or insurrection. Jefferson's excitement about this extraordinary fact is palpable. This could very well be the political discovery of the ages: a people whose very *character* allowed them to harness all the positive good embodied in popular vigilance

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[110] TJ to Smith, November 13, 1787, TJP, 12: 355-357.

while, at the same time, checking its tendency (throughout history) to run amok to the very destruction of popular government and the re-establishment of despotic states. Unlike "governments of force," which included even "most… republics," American governments, Jefferson seemed to suggest, *could* be "mild in their punishment of rebellions" -- not "discourag[ing] them too much" – precisely because there was ultimately little to fear from such a people (at least for "honest republican governors"). In America, popular vigilance – even when it "produced" individual incidents which were "absolutely unjustifiable" – actually could be encouraged as a healing "medicine necessary for the sound health of government" or a "storm" cleansing the atmosphere, rather than suppressed for fear of its potential for destruction. For now, this seemed largely peculiar to the American situation, which is another reason Jefferson continued to hold up the American example as, not necessarily an easily emulated model, but as a beacon of hope for what *might* one day become possible for all peoples.[111]

This same spirit of engagement that both animated and quelled Shays's Rebellion, as Jefferson would never tire of telling his correspondents, would later both toss the Federalists out of power in 1800 and snuff out threats to Union during Jefferson's presidency and beyond. And, years later, when the electorate threw out most of the Fourteenth Congress in one of the biggest legislative turnovers in American history, Jefferson declared himself "highly pleased with this proof of the innate good sense, the vigilance, and the determination of the people to act for themselves." The public

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[111] TJ to Madison, January 30, 1787, in Smith, ed., Republic of Letters, II: 461. TJ's view of Shays' Rebellion anticipated that of the first history of the episode: George Richards Minot, The History of the Insurrections in Massachusetts, published in 1788. Minot argued that "the manner in which these difficulties were suppressed, does honor to the government, and displays the strongest marks of reflection and wisdom in the people." Quoted in David P. Szatmary, Shays' Rebellion: The Making of an Agrarian Insurrection (Amherst, 1980), xi.

response was particularly compelling since the people had been largely let down by a "silent" press and were "unled by their leaders." In other words, the American people, without any encouragement from an "enlightened" leadership or informative press, had proven themselves capable of discerning and acting in their own interest.[112] These periodical episodes of popular vigilance simply reinforced what Jefferson had told English radical Richard Price in 1785: that the happiness of American government, "wherein the people are truly the mainspring," was "that [it was] never to be despaired of." Why? Because, "when an evil becomes so glaring as to strike them generally, they arrouse themselves, and it is redressed."[113]

So Jefferson valued this "spirit of resistance," but his was hardly a precursor to Mao's "permanent revolution."[114] The other central manifestation of the American "spirit," already evident in the reaction to Shays, was its commitment to law and order. In fact, popular vigilance was not incompatible with such a commitment. To the contrary, the United States had the "strongest Government on earth" precisely because the American citizen, "at the call of the law, would fly to the standard of the law, and would meet invasions of the public order as his own personal concern."[115] In notes he took for his first inaugural address, Jefferson expressed hope that the "distinctive mark of an American" would be that "in cases of commotion he enlists himself under no man's

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[112] Jefferson to Gallatin, June 16, 1817, ibid., 15: 132. On the Fourteenth Congress, see Charles Sellers, The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815-1848 (New York, 1991), 104-107.

[113] TJ to Price, February 1, 1785, in TJW, 798.

[114] Stuart R. Schram, "Mao Tse-tung and the Theory of the Permanent Revolution, 1958-69," The China Quarterly, No. 46 (Apr. - Jun., 1971), pp. 221-244.

[115] First Inaugural Address, March 4, 1801, in TJW, 493. As Paul A. Rahe has noted, even Antifederalists distanced themselves from Shays: see Rahe, Republics Ancient and Modern, 698, 1100, n. 44. What makes Jefferson unusual here is not his bloodlust for "rebellion," but his equanimity in the face of danger to public order from the democracy.

banner, enquires for no man's name but repairs to the standard of the laws."[116] Alexis de Tocqueville later echoed Jefferson, noting that "each individual" in America had "a personal interest in seeing to it that everyone obeys the law." Since everyone ("apart from slaves, servants, and paupers"[117]) is allowed to vote, an attack on the laws must "either change the nation's opinion or trample upon its will." In America, Tocqueville posited, "the common man has an exalted idea of political rights because he has such rights."[118] Or, as Jefferson put it, more colorfully: "where every man… feels that he is a participator in the government of affairs… he will let the heart be torn out of his body sooner than his power be wrested from him by a Caesar or a Bonaparte."[119] When the law is the people's handiwork, the people will obey it and rise to defend it.

This is precisely the way Jefferson later explained the diffusion of Aaron Burr's conspiracy before it could really do any damage. The very moment Jefferson "apprised our citizens that there were traitors among them, and what was their object, they rose upon them wherever they lurked, and crushed by their own strength what would have produced the march of armies and civil war in any other country. The government which

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[116] Notes for First Inaugural Address, in Ford, ed., Federal Edition, vol. 9: 193.

[117] Tocqueville apparently took it for granted that his readers would understand that women were not allowed the franchise.

[118] Tocqueville, Democracy in America, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (New York, 2004), 273-277. Also see TJ to Samuel Kercheval, July 12, 1816, in L&B, vol. 15: 37-38, and Tocqueville, Democracy in America, trans. Henry Reeve (Norton Critical Edition, ed., Isaac Krammnick, 2007), 259: An American, Tocqueville, can "inform you what his rights are, and by what means he exercises them; he wil be able to point out the customs which obtain in the political world. You will find that he is well acquainted with the rules of the administration, and that he is familiar with the mechanism of the laws. The citizen of the United States does not acquire his practical science and his positive notions from books…. *The American learns to know the laws by participating in the act of legislation; and he takes a lesson in the forms of government, from governing*" (emphasis added).

[119] TJ to Joseph C. Cabell, February 2, 1816, in L&B, 14: 422. The irony of this passage is that Jefferson's primary example of this spirit was New England's resistance to the Embargo.

can wield the arm of the people must be the strongest possible." The lesson of the Burr Conspiracy, then, Jefferson argued, was "that we are a people capable of self-government, and worthy of it."[120] "The suppression of the late conspiracy by the hand of the people, uplifted to destroy it whenever it reared its head," Jefferson effused, "manifests their fitness for self-government, and the power of a nation, of which every individual feels that his own will is a part of the public authority."[121]

The election of 1800, from Jefferson's perspective, was also a profound manifestation of the American spirit. Throughout the 1790s, Jefferson believed, the republic had been threatened by "a sect" designed to overturn the Revolution and lead America to monarachy. Early on, Jefferson had assumed that the Federalists were "preachers without followers" because the "people are firm and constant in their republican purity."[122] But during the war scare with France, the same public sent Federalist majorities to Congress. Jefferson consistently explained Federalist popularity as the temporary result of deliberate manipulation and fear-mongering. Jefferson's dilemma during the 1790s was how to legitimately resist the Federalists while they *seemed* to have the public imprimatur; without, in other words, seeming to threaten properly-constituted government itself. Unlike Hamilton, who worried that "pure republicanism" might not be "obtained consistently with order," Jefferson ultimately concluded that the spirit of vigilance in defense of republicanism and resistance to tyranny was, at the same time, a spirit likewise devoted to the kind of law and order that

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[120] To Isaac Weaver, June 7, 1807, ibid., 11: 220-221.

[121] To the Representatives of the people of New Jersey in their Legislature, December 10, 1807, ibid., 16: 295.

[122] Jefferson to Lafayette, June 16, 1792, TJP 24: 85.

would accompany pure republicanism in America.[123] They were, for Jefferson, two sides of the same coin.

Jefferson reached this conclusion, in part, by thinking through a significant distinction "between acts against the *government*, and acts against the *Oppressions of the governmen*t." "The latter" (acts resisting government tyranny) he insisted, "are virtues."[124] Accordingly, Jefferson rejected the Federalist charge that the Republicans were in "opposition to the government." Hamilton and others were engaging in sophistry and obfuscation, "endeavoring to turn on the government itself those censures I meant for the *enemies* of the government to wit those who want to change it into a monarchy."[125] Or, as Madison put it, in reply: "Surely if it be innocent and decent" for Federalists to criticize American republicanism (as the Republicans understood it), "it can not be very criminal or indecent" for Republicans "to patronize a written defence of the principles on which that Govt. is founded."[126] The same people, in other words, could resist government tyranny while remaining committed to a properly constituted government. This is one reason Jefferson counseled patience to fellow-republicans sickened by Federalist measures. Jefferson worried that Federalist behavior might energize some Republicans to actual "insurrection," but "nothing," Jefferson warned, "could be so fatal." Such, he warned (perhaps remembering Shays) was "not the kind of opposition the American people will permit." Outright rebellion at such a time would have the effect opposite the intentions of its enthusiasts: it "would check the progress of the public

[123] Report of a Conversation with Alexander Hamilton, *Anas*, Ford, ed., Federal Edition, vol. 1: 169.

[124] Report on A Convention with Spain, March 22, 1792, in Ford, ed., Federal Edition, vol. 6: 447-448.

[125] TJ to Madison, May 9, 1791, in ROL, 2: 688, emphasis added.

[126] Madison to TJ, May 12, 1791, ibid., 688-89.

opinion and rally them round the government." Based on his reading of earlier episodes in American history, Jefferson remained willing to wait out the good sense of the people. As Jefferson said of Shays's Rebellion: the people "may be led astray for a moment, but will soon correct themselves."[127] This was Jefferson's consistent mantra throughout the 1790s also. A little patience, and the people would rally, the "reign of witches" would pass, and the republic would be saved.[128]

Of course, this narrative depicting a spontaneous rallying of the American citizenry left out a good deal of politicking. Nevertheless, Jefferson believed that the people had responded well; his election proved once again both a spirit of resistance to tyranny and a "love of order and obedience to the laws."[129] This evidence of public opinion as manifested in elections confirmed Jefferson's hopes in 1800. The election was Jefferson's evidence that he had been right: the American people really *were* enlightened after all; they really were able to separate truth from fiction and separate the natural aristocratic "wheat" from the Federalist "chaff."[130] Near the end of his life, Jefferson remembered how the Federalist desire for monarchy had been, as he put it, "completely

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[127] TJ to Edward Carrington, January 16, 1787, TJP 11: 49.

[128] See, among others, Jefferson to John Taylor, June 1, 1798, L&B 10: 44-47; To James Lewis, Jr., May 9, 1798, in ibid., 37; To Elbridge Gerry, Jan. 26, 1799, in ibid., 80-83; To Thaddeus Kosciusko, Feb. 21, 1799, in ibid., 115-16; To Robert R. Livingston, February 28, 1799 ibid., 118-19; To Thomas Lomax, March 12, 1799, in TJP 31: 77-78; To William Green Munford, June 18, 1799, in TJW, 1065; To Priestly, January 27, 1800, in L&B, 10: 148; To Thomas Mann Randolph, Feb, 2, 1800 ibid., 151; To Rush, September 23, 1800, TJP 32: 167-68; To John Dickinson, March 6, 1801, in ibid., 33: 196; To James Warren, March 21, 1801, in ibid., 398.

[129] TJ to Benjamin Waring, March 23, 1801, in L&B, 10: 235.

[130] Jefferson to John Adams, October 28, 1813, in AJL, 388.

foiled by the universal spirit of the nation."[131] It was this spirit that Jefferson counted on to preserve the republic.

In short, as Jefferson put it to Lafayette, "The yeomanry of the United States are not the canaille of Paris." They were "very different materials" from the rabble of European cities. The "cement of this Union is in the heart-blood of every American" and there was no other government on earth "established on so immovable a basis."[132]

Jefferson's confidence in the American people helps clarify his enthusiasm for the "natural aristocracy" of virtue and talent, what he called "the most precious gift of nature for the instruction, the trusts, and government of society." But he did not have the blind faith in such an assemblage of talent that Adams and others imagined. He knew as well as Adams that the natural aristocracy was capable of quickly turning into a pack of wolves. But, based on his experience with them, he expected that the American people would see such a move well before it happened and check its progress. The American people, he asserted, were uniquely capable of recognizing this aristocracy and electing it to public office. In fact, in his most famous letter on the subject, Jefferson told John Adams that the very definition of a good government was one in which the people were rendered capable of recognizing and electing the natural aristocracy.[133] This may seem cynical – or we may be cynical, rather, about the way "public opinion" generally seemed to

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[131] To Judge William Johnson, June 12, 1823, in L&B 15: 443.

[132] TJ to Lafayette, February 14, 1815, in L&B, 14: 252.

[133] TJ to Adams; also see TJ to Walter Jones, January 2, 1814, in L&B, 14: 47; and to Dupont de Nemours, April 24, 1816, in Malone, ed., Correspondence between Jefferson and DuPont, 182. The people, Jefferson told DuPont, were "competent to judge of the facts occurring in ordinary life," but were "unqualified for management of affairs requiring intelligence above the common level." But since Americans remained "competent judges of human character [itself a democratic virtue], they chuse for their management, representatives."

magically coincide with Jefferson's own, but what is truly remarkable about his argument to Adams is that for the first time in human history the "democracy" had become so trustworthy that its opinion embraced the most advanced views of the "aristocracy" and granted an enthusiastic consent to the implementation of the ideas of the most progressive philosophers and scientists (and politicians). In this way, Jefferson balanced his more traditional commitment to enlightened leadership with his fear of power and his embrace of popular engagement in politics. Adams had no such faith, and in this sense, Jefferson's description of their differences was close to the mark: that Adams feared the many while Jefferson trusted them. Actually, Adams (as he tried to tell Jefferson repeatedly) feared the few but doubted the capacity of the many to check them, while Jefferson knew that the few could become tyrannical but believed in the ability of the many to prevent that from succeeding. The American people – even common people who did not necessarily have the wherewithal or intellectual capacity to run national affairs – did, Jefferson argued, have the sense to distinguish statesmen from demagogues and to wisely evaluate the performance of elected officials and the courage to stand against them when they went astray. But Jefferson was not just a Pollyanna – optimistic in the face of all evidence to the contrary. He believed these things of the *American* people in a way that he could not muster for others. And he tells us why he believes this. His exceptionalism was hardly a leap into the utopian dark; it came only after long experience and reflection.

We tend to forget the context in which Jefferson made such claims for American democracy. Since the best governments were, as everyone since Montesquieu understood, shaped to fit the peculiar character of the people of a nation, most

governments in history, Jefferson noted, had been governments of force or corruption.[134] Self-government of all varieties had long been associated with anarchy and descent into tyranny. Jefferson himself worried about this problem of the people's character when contemplating the new constitution for Virginia in 1776. Because Jefferson understood "that a choice by the people themselves is not generally distinguished for it's wisdom," one of his principle critiques of this constitution was that its senate was "too homogeneous with the house of delegates." The whole point of bicameralism, he insisted, was "to introduce the influence of different interests or different principles." Accordingly, he proposed that the Virginia upper house be appointed by the lower house –filtered, in other words, through a body of electors chosen by the people (though it seems worth noting here that Jefferson never suggested different property qualifications for either the voters or candidates for the senate).[135] This filtration, he believed would "generally" result in the choice of "wise men," and, in any case, nearly anything was preferable to a Senate that was "a mere creation by and dependance on the people."[136]

Jefferson's 1776 opinion was not particularly unusual, but reflected the common wisdom of the day. In fact, his argument and proposals for the senate very much resembled those in John Adams's influential pamphlet, *Thoughts on Government*.[137] In

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[134] TJ to Adams, Feb. 28, 1796, in AJL, 259-260.

[135] This partly reflects a Virginia tradition of confidence in the deference of the people to their traditional leaders – a tradition which affected Virginia's relatively popular constitution and may have shaped Jefferson's own later confidence in the American people. See J. R. Pole, *Political Representation in England and the Origins of the American Republic* (Berkeley, 1966), 282, 294-95.

[136] Jefferson to Edmund Pendleton, August 26, 1776, in Boyd, ed., *PTJ*, vol. 1, 503-04. For Jefferson's proposal(s), see ibid., 341, 348, and 358. For Jefferson's later criticism, see *Notes*, ed., Peden, 119-20, and his 1783 draft of a new constitution in ibid., 211.

[137] Adams, *Thoughts on Government: Applicable to the Present State of the American Colonies* (Philadelphia, 1776), in Charles Francis Adams, ed., *The Works of John Adams*, 10 vols. (Boston, 1851), vol. 4, 195-196.

fact, his first draft of a constitution for Virginia was closer to conservative Carter Braxton's in its proposal that Senators have life appointments[138] and, even his later revisions in 1783 were less "democratic" than the 1779 constitution Adams proposed for Massachusetts, which embraced direct popular election of both legislative houses as well as the executive.[139] The thought of nearly all of the American founders was animated by the understanding that pure democracies, as Madison noted in the tenth *Federalist*, "have ever been spectacles of turbulence and contention; have ever been found incompatible with personal security or the rights of property; and have in general been as short in their lives, as they have been violent in their deaths."[140] Madison argued that a compound federal republic was the solution or "cure" for these problems inherent in direct democracy. Jefferson also tended to agree with Madison throughout his life about the impracticability of pure democracy for the United States since such governments were of necessity "restrained to very narrow limits of space and population" not much larger than "a New England township."[141]

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[138] A proposal which the Virginia Convention rejected outright in favor of direct popular election of state Senators. See the Virginia Constitution of 1776 in Boyd, ed., PTJ, vol. 1: 379-80; Jefferson's first draft, in *ibid*., 341. On Braxton's proposal, see Pole, *Political Representation in England and the Origins of the American Republic*, 291-92.

[139] Palmer, *Age of the Democratic Revolution*, 1: 276-77.

[140] Madison, "Ten," in J.R. Pole, ed., The Federalist (Indianapolis, 2005), 52. Also see Carter Braxton's concern that the new constitutions proposed in an independent America would be "fraught with all the tumult and riot incident to simple democracy," in Braxton, An Address to the Convention of the Colony and Ancient Dominion of Virginia; on the Subject of Government in General, and Recommending a Particular Form to Their Consideration (May 1776), in The Founders' Constitution, Volume 1, Chapter 18, Document 10, http://press-pubs.uchicago.edu/founders/documents/v1ch18s10.html
The University of Chicago Press, 1987.

[141] TJ to John Taylor, May 28, 1816, L&B., 15: 19-22; also see TJ to Isaac Tiffany, August 26, 1816, ibid., 15: 66.

But, over time, his confidence in popular wisdom and evolved. And unlike most of the other founders, he moved away from – instead of fully embracing – institutional solutions to the problem of democracy and *toward* a trust in the spirit and character of the American people themselves.[142] This is not to say that he blithely ignored the problems of majoritarian tyranny or that he abandoned the concept of checks and balances, as we will see. Rather, he asserted that the American republic could more safely incorporate "the direct action of the citizens"[143] without fear of anarchy precisely because the character of the American people and its experiment with representative democracy had "rendered useless almost everything written before on the structure of government."[144] While he understood democracy to be impracticable on a large scale, Jefferson nevertheless believed that the solution of representation championed by Madison could still incorporate the democratic principle of consent/participation. He tended to not make much of the distinction between a representative republic (the term he favored) and a democracy, thus disengaging democracy from its traditionally narrow definition.[145] As he put it to Isaac Tiffany in 1816: "It seems not to have occurred [to ancient philosophers] that where the citizens cannot meet to transact their business in person, they alone have the right to choose the agents who shall transact it; and that in this way a republican, or popular government, of the second grade of purity, may be exercised over any extent of country." In other words, the dichotomy European theorists had drawn – and the choice

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[142] On the modern preference for institutional safeguards against human frailty, see Paul A. Rahe, "Antiquity Surpassed: The Repudiation of Classical Republicanism," in David Wootton, ed., *Republicanism, Liberty, and Commercial Society, 1649-1776* (Stanford, 1994), 255.

[143] TJ to John Taylor, May 28, 1816, ibid., 15: 19-22.

[144] TJ to Isaac Tiffany, August 26, 1816, ibid., 15: 66.

[145] Palmer, "Notes on the Use of the Word 'Democracy,' 212.

they offered -- between a pure (and thus impracticable) democracy and a tyranny "independent of the people" was false. Direct action of citizens might be more or less incorporated into a representative republic.

For his part, Jefferson wished "to see the republican element of popular control pushed to the maximum of its practicable exercise."[146] Which is why Jefferson could argue in 1816 that democracy was both "impracticable beyond the limits of a city, or small township" and nevertheless, by the principle of representation, the only standard for a true American government. "For let it be agreed," he told Samuel Kercheval, "that a government is republican in proportion as every member composing it has his equal voice in the direction of its concerns… and let us bring to the test of this canon every branch of our Constitution."[147]

* * *

Many years later, John Adams playfully mocked Jefferson's effusive encomium to the "mighty Wave of public Opinion" which rolled over the Universe in 1800. "Oh! Mr. Jefferson! …. What 'a wave' has rolled over Christendom for 1500 years? What a Wave has rolled over France for 1500 Years supporting in Power and Glory the Dinasty of Bourbon? What a Wave supported the House of Austria? What a Wave has supported the Dinasty of Mahomet, for 1200 Years?.... What a Wave has the French Revolution

[146] TJ to Isaac Tiffany, August 26, 1816, L&B 15: 66.

[147] TJ to Samuel Kercheval, July 12, 1816, in *L&B*, vol. 15: 33.

spread?"[148] Adams is as hilarious as he is loveable in this correspondence, but he misunderstood Jefferson's point (and his wisdom has misled numerous historians into believing that his fully contrasts with Jefferson's position). Jefferson did not trust the "mighty wave of public opinion" which swept over France during the Terror, or any of the other waves Adams described. He trusted the public opinion of a particular people, enlightened and uniquely suited for democratic governance. What was new "under the sun" about the election of 1800 was not that a population rose up to affect world affairs, nor even that a government had elicited popular support, but that this American people proved itself so capable of sorting out truth from fiction; indeed, capable of governing itself.

Only in America, Jefferson argued repeatedly, were humans actually freed up to fulfill their natural potential for self-government. This was why Jefferson was so optimistic about the prospects for democracy here – and why he will always remain inseparable from our self-image. John Adams was right. Jefferson did tell us what we want to hear about ourselves.[149] But he did so, it seems worth noting, not when America was the greatest industrial and the most powerful military country in the world, but in the context of a post-Revolutionary society, precariously holding on to its existence, fending off threats from Spanish vultures fomenting discontent among white settlers in the Southwest and British ones stirring up Indians in the Northwest; navigating French and English efforts to hamper American trade in the Atlantic and Caribbean. In this context, Jefferson's expressions of American greatness take on a different tone from the

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[148] Adams to TJ, June 14, 1813, in AJL, 330. Adams is referring to Jefferson's assertion in his letter to Joseph Priestly, March 21, 1801, in TJW, 1086.
[149] Adams to TJ, July 13, 1813, in Cappon, ed., *Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 356.

bombastic patriotism that has so alienated many in the international community in the 20th and early 21st centuries.[150] Instead, Jefferson's American exceptionalism becomes a kind of post-colonial, provincial expression of difference from (and superiority to) the old world just thrown off, which, in its anxiety to measure up, America was free to characterize as insufficiently pure, old, effete, aristocratic, and sclerotic.[151]

As John Adams once noted, Jefferson's true genius was that he so cheerfully and hopefully believed that public opinion in America would achieve the enlightenment of the natural aristocracy. Only in America, Jefferson asserted over and again, were citizens free to assent to truth without minds clouded by generations of despotism, priestcraft, poverty, illiteracy, sophistry, and over-refinement. The American "ploughman" – that farmer who read Homer[152] – needed only the facts to make the wise (and right) decision: to assent to truth.

In 1816, Jefferson included a fragment from a poem by Sir William Jones in a letter he wrote to John Taylor advocating democratic reforms in the Virginia Constitution. Though arguably less powerful and impressive as poetry, it offers a Jeffersonian answer, of sorts, to the sentiment expressed in the e.e. cummings poem that opened this essay:

> What constitutes a State?
> Not high-raised battlements, or labor'd mound,
> Thick wall, or moated gate;

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[150] See Simon Schama, "The Unloved American," *New Yorker*, March 10, 2003, 34-39.

[151] For a succinct and compelling discussion of the American Revolution as an unexpectedly creative movement among the provincial (American) elite who rejected old world standards they found unattainable and were, thus, able to think about old problems in fresh ways, see Bernard Bailyn, "Politics and the Creative Imagination," in *To Begin the World Anew: The Genius and Ambiguities of the American Founders* (New York, 2003), 3-36.

[152] TJ to St. John de Crevecoeur, January 15, 1787, in Peterson, ed., *Writings*, 878.

> Not cities proud, with spires and turrets crown'd;
>   No: men, high-minded men;
>   Men, who their duties know;
> But know their rights; and knowing, dare maintain.
>   These constitute a State.[153]

Things would continue to go well with America, he told Taylor in the same letter, "while our present character remains." It was precisely this character, the strength of the nation, that Jefferson believed exceptional about Americans. Which is why his much-lauded championing of democracy, at least during his own day, tended to stop at the borders of the United States. Other peoples could have American democracy when, and only when, they became more like Americans.

[153] To John Taylor, May 28, 1816, L&B 15: 21. The poem is "An Ode In Imitation of Alcaeus" (1781). Compare the original poem by Alcaeus of Mytilene translated in Rahe, *Republics Ancient and Modern*, 30: "Neither stone blocks/ Nor ships' timbers/ Nor even the carpenter's art/ Can make a polis./ But where there are men/ Who know how to preserve themselves/ There one finds walls and a city as well."