

Thomas Jefferson and American Foreign Policy

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Summary: Jefferson's conceptions of the US national interest, and of the diplomatic postures by which it was most fit to be advanced, still inform US foreign policy today, in respect of uneasy contrast between withdrawal and reformation. "For Jefferson, as for subsequent American statesmen, the desire to change the world was at war with the desire not to be corrupted by the world... The combination of universalism and parochialism is the result of a self-consciousness over role that forms a constant in the nation's history". Yet "the conventional contrast of the roles of exemplar and crusader has often obscured the affinity that may always exist between them", as between thought and action. Jefferson's own statecraft illustrated the hazards of crusadership, as his early sympathy for the French Revolution and desire for American territorial expansion led to a 'neutralism' which effectively supported Napoleon Bonaparte and brought about war with Britain.

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Two hundred years ago, on March 21, 1790, Thomas Jefferson arrived in New York City to assume his duties as secretary of state, the first under the new national government. No man had a greater impact on the day-to-day conduct of American foreign policy than Jefferson during his long life of public service. And throughout the course of American history few can rival Jefferson as a living symbol of the nation's purpose. That his writings might be invoked on every side of a given controversy has always added to the uses of the Jeffersonian past; all the great conflicts of the nineteenth century—over slavery, union and democracy—found partisans on either side appealing to the "sagacious aphorisms and oracular sayings" of the great Virginian. The same has been true in foreign policy, where Jefferson's name has been invoked on all sides of the ever-recurring debates on the nation's diplomatic stance.

It is in Jefferson's sense of values that the deepest association exists between his own outlook and the American mind. The institutions that characterize American public life today—the standing military establishments, the ballooning debt and high taxes, the

whole complex of banks, corporations and financial markets, the subordinate position of state governments in relation to national power, the exalted status of federal judicature—all this he would have beheld with a kind of sacred horror, as constituting the victory of Alexander Hamilton's Federalist vision of American life. Uncannily, however, the ideals of American life remain Jeffersonian, even in the midst of all these powerful and corrupting institutions; we cannot help but turn to Jefferson, even with the knowledge that the values he championed can often be made a subject of reproach against him.

The main source of Jefferson's continuing appeal lies in the facility with which he evoked the meaning of the American experiment in self-government. He thought of America the way we like to think of ourselves, and saw its significance, as we still now tend to do, in terms larger than itself. Whether in relation to the domestic experiment at home or the conduct of the republic toward foreign powers, his most characteristic utterance was the contrast he drew between the high moral purpose that animated our own national life and action, and the low motives of power and expediency that drove other nations. Even the labor of the farm had a meaning beyond the hard drudgeries of existence—of clearing the forest, tending to crops and providing shelter. To the meanest dirt farmer Jefferson gave the conviction that he—the American—was part of a form of civilization higher than the polished societies of Europe, with their artificial distinctions between social classes, their oppressive restrictions on human freedom, and their crushing burden of debt and taxes. That a republic so constituted should be guided in its foreign policy by the same calculations of power and expedience as animated the states of Europe was unthinkable. Those who felt power and forgot right could teach only negative lessons, by showing the path by which America might become corrupted.

Jefferson's vision was not without its critics, then or later. Europeans found laughable the notion that American civilization, with no art or literature considered worthy of mention, and animated in its daily life by the drives of "sordid avarice," might be held to represent a higher form of communal life; European diplomats gave no credence to the view that the external policy of the young republic was inspired by a noble moral purpose. The denunciations did not matter, and barely disturbed the American in his illusions, if illusions they were. America—the "solitary republic of the world, the only monument of human rights . . . the sole depository of the sacred fire of freedom and self-government, from hence it is to be lighted up in other regions of the earth, if other regions of the earth shall ever become susceptible to its benign influence"—this "hallowed ark of human hope and happiness" involved for Jefferson "everything dear to man."¹

Jefferson is the great exemplar, along with Woodrow Wilson, of the national conviction—so persistent and profound—that we have rejected an ancient reason of state, that we stand for something new under the sun, and that our destiny as a nation is to lead the world from the old to the new. No one gave more fervent and eloquent expression to this conviction than Wilson, at a time when the nation's star, though already very high, was still rising. But the same conviction was apparent from the outset, as Jefferson testifies, though the circumstances attending it were quite modest. America was destined to set an example to the world both in the principles of society it entertained at home and in the policies it followed abroad. "We are firmly convinced, and we act on that conviction," Jefferson declared in his second inaugural address, "that with nations, as with individuals, our interests soundly calculated will ever be found inseparable from our moral duties."² The foreign policy that faithfully reflected this conviction was bound to be radically different from the foreign policies of the European states.

The origins of the belief that this nation had rejected an ancient reason of state must be found in the first instance in the differences seen to separate republics from monarchies. The logic of reason of state was the logic of monarchies, not of republics. It was the logic of those who found in war the principal outlet for their passions and energies, who made of the "military system" the first principle of government. "Why are not republics plunged into war," Thomas Paine had asked, "but because the nature of their government does not admit of an interest distinct from that of the nation?"³ Paine's answer might just as well have been given by Jefferson. Only when the decision for war rested on the will of the community rather than the will of an unrepresentative government would this ever-present specter of the old diplomacy begin to recede and a great step toward permanent peace be taken. Hamilton had inveighed against the view that the "genius of republics is pacific," just as he had objected to the equation of peace with the spirit of commerce. "The causes of hostility among nations are innumerable," he had argued; they operate independently of forms of government.⁴

The argument found no favor with Republicans. Indeed, it was generally at odds with the progressive thought of the time, and certainly at odds with the thought of the philosophes which Jefferson found so congenial. And if Jefferson, and James Madison as well, did not share the extreme view that saw in a world of republics the guarantee of universal and perpetual peace, they, and Republicans generally, did find in the advent of republican governments not only the prospect of a radical decline in the role played by war but the prospect as well of a virtual revolution in the conduct of diplomacy.

The belief that America had rejected a traditional reason of state was deepened still further by the identification of the nation's fate with the fate of freedom in the world,

by the sense that the security and well-being of the United States were inseparable from the prospects of free government everywhere. This outlook, it seems almost redundant to observe, became deeply embedded in the nation's psyche early on and is today more triumphant than ever. America's national purpose is seen not only to distinguish it from other nations but to give its interests a special character. The vital interests of other states, even of great states, are bounded ultimately by the state itself. But the same cannot be said of the state that stands for the freedom of people everywhere, on whose continued strength and well-being the hopes and future of freedom rest. The equation of America's security and survival with that of freedom in the world has not only given to American statecraft a dimension above and beyond a conventional reason of state, but has made the two seem somehow qualitatively different. Jefferson was not the only early American statesman to articulate this credo. Yet none gave it more eloquent and enduring expression than he.

Did Jefferson in fact reject a traditional reason of state? Certainly he appeared to reject the three claims that formed the basis of the doctrine: that statecraft constituted an autonomous realm governed by its own rules, that the vital interests of the state were supreme over the interests of civil society, and that the restraints of legality must give way before necessity. In place of the dual standard of the reason of state, he had "but one system of ethics for men and for nations—to be grateful, to be faithful to all engagements under all circumstances, to be open and generous, promoting in the long run even the interests of both."⁵

Against the assertion of the primacy of foreign over domestic policy, he insisted that the objectives of foreign policy were but a means to the end of protecting and promoting the goals of domestic society, that is, the individual's freedom and society's well-being. And as against the view that necessity might override legal obligation, Jefferson held that the chief security of liberty lay in the iron constraints of a written constitution.

There are moments in Jefferson's life when his rejection of reason of state appears final and irrevocable, when the whole soul of his political existence seems directed against state power and its insidious auxiliaries. That rejection went deeper than an insistence on a strict construction of the Constitution and a belief that to take a single step beyond those limited grants of authority was to open wide the field to unbounded power and ambition. He rejected, in fact, the whole apparatus of the modern state that had emerged in Europe in the eighteenth century. The combination of funded debt, executive power, burdensome taxation, government-supported manufactures and standing military establishments that characterized the great powers in the eighteenth century (and that continues to characterize the modern state today, only more so) was thought by Jefferson to constitute the very essence of tyrannical government.

In the Jeffersonian scheme of things, America was to be different. It was meant to escape the corruptions of Europe, something it could not do if it succumbed to the blandishments of the power state. When Hamilton threw his support behind measures designed to bolster the state in the approved European manner at the outset of the Washington administration, Jefferson detected a design to subvert the Constitution and abort the American experiment in liberty. To this supposed project, and to Hamilton's associated plans to establish a national bank, secure bounties for domestic manufactures and expand the army and navy beyond the merest of constabulary functions, Jefferson was passionately and systematically opposed.

These considerations go far toward explaining Jefferson's attitude toward war, that great instrument of reason of state. War, and the necessities that were regularly alleged to attend its conduct, constantly threatened the very institutions and values that provided its ultimate justification-and above all for republics. Hence, for Jefferson and for Republicans generally, war was the great nemesis. In *Political Observations* (1795), an essay that stands out as a classic expression of the Republican credo, Madison wrote:

Of all the enemies to public liberty, war is, perhaps, the most to be dreaded, because it comprises and develops the germ of every other. War is the parent of armies; from these proceed debts and taxes; and armies, and debts, and taxes are the known instruments for bringing the many under the domination of the few.⁶

This outlook did not prevent the Jeffersonians from embracing what would now be called police actions against either American Indians or Algerines; it did, however, make the prospect of war with the great powers-preeminently Britain and France-something to be avoided save in the worst extremity. War would introduce into the republic all the elements of its corruption-debt, taxes, standing armies, artificial privileges of all kinds, ultimately an enlargement of executive power that would lead to the reintroduction of monarchy. This was Jefferson's deepest instinct, and though he drew close to war on many occasions throughout his life and indeed sometimes wished dearly that it might come to purge his rage against foreign transgression, in the end he nearly always drew back.

If doubt must nevertheless persist that Jefferson rejected the central contentions of a traditional reason of state, it is not only because he employed most of the means characteristic of the old statecraft but also because of the ambitious objectives that he had for the United States. The means that he adopted often conflicted in fact with the principles he championed, and seem on occasion scarcely reconcilable with gratitude, honest dealing and a strict observance of legal obligations. The ends that he embraced, moreover, were scarcely modest. The belief in the necessity of territorial expansion, alongside the conviction that no constitution was as well suited as America's for

"extensive empire and self-government"; the principle of freedom of commerce, which sought to free trade from the shackles of mercantilism; the attachment to neutral rights, or freedom of commerce in war, which aimed at mitigating the hardships that war imposed on neutral states while extending the benefits war brought to them; finally, the idea of the two hemispheres, which found its way into the Monroe Doctrine and declared the American continents beyond the reach of European war and despotism—all these objectives run throughout Jefferson's career as an American statesman. They constituted an imposing edifice; they described a structure of power that, if realized, would place few obstacles in the way of the territorial and commercial expansion of the United States. What Montesquieu and Frederick the Great said of the diplomacy of the *ancien régime* might also be said of Jefferson's. In both cases, "the fundamental rule of governments" was "the principle of extending their territories."

III

The great dilemma of Jefferson's statecraft lay in his apparent renunciation of the means on which states had always ultimately relied to ensure their security and to satisfy their ambitions, and his simultaneous unwillingness to renounce the ambitions that normally led to the use of these means. He wished, in other words, that America could have it both ways—that it could enjoy the fruits of power without falling victim to the normal consequences of its exercise.

He had good reasons for wanting both of these things, because both were indispensable to the realization of his vision of the American future. Both sprang from his vision of American society, and reflected classic instances of the primacy of domestic policy. But to pursue them together created for him a dilemma with which he wrestled throughout his presidency—one that forced him to articulate and ultimately to employ a new diplomatic method, sharply opposed to the classical statecraft of Hamilton. "To conquer without war" was the prime objective (the "first fact") of Jeffersonian politics, observed the French diplomat Louis Marie Turreau in 1805—and so it was.⁷ Jefferson was not the first statesman to think of conquering without war. But he was the first to take the thought seriously and to seek to put it into practice. How he might do so constituted the essence of his problem in dealing with the external world.

The threats of war and alliance represented one way of conquering without war, and Jefferson resorted frequently to these altogether traditional diplomatic means. He was never averse to securing his aims by conjuring up before his adversary a diplomatic combination on the enemy's opposite flank, and he often threatened war against Spain. But this was playing at the devil's game, and he knew it. If forced to make good on

either threat, he understood that his enemies might have the "consolation of Satan in removing our first parents from Paradise."⁸

The core of his diplomatic method lay elsewhere, in the instrument of "peaceable coercion." By this he meant an ordering of American economic relations that would leave the mercantilist states of Europe no choice but to succumb to American demands. Premised on the great advantages the European powers derived from their commerce with America, he thought that by mere domestic legislation he could work his will upon other powers, despite their hostility.

The promise of Jefferson's statecraft was thus of a new diplomacy, based on the confidence of a free and virtuous people, that would secure ends founded on the natural and universal rights of man, by means that escaped war and its corruptions. He himself never employed the term "new diplomacy," perhaps because the French had already made use of it. But that it was in substance new, that it constituted a radical break from the traditions of Old World diplomacy-of this he was utterly persuaded. America stood against force in two respects. Unlike other states, it did not make the fatal confusion between might and right. In its stance toward the external world, no less than in its constitutional order at home, it stood on principles that were freely accessible to all men through reason, and that did not depend for their validity on local circumstances and particular interests, still less on raw power. These principles were to be validated, in turn, by a new diplomatic method that was coercive yet eschewed force. The traditional view, shared by Hamilton, had been stated most succinctly by Frederick the Great: diplomacy without armaments, he had held, was like music without instruments. Jefferson meant to show the falsity of this doctrine, and he would ultimately come to stake the whole of his statecraft on the demonstration.

IV

The Jeffersonian legacy in foreign policy has always been identified with a distinctive conception of the role that external affairs ought to play in the American scheme of things. In this view, the purposes and objectives of foreign policy may be properly understood only as a means to the end of protecting and promoting individual freedom and well-being. No end of foreign policy can be morally autonomous, self-justifying, an end in itself. Instead, all the ends of foreign policy must be seen as means to the ends of society, which are in turn ultimately the ends of individuals.

In this respect, as in so many others, the outlook of Jefferson has been contrasted regularly with that of Hamilton. Yet the principle that subordinated foreign to domestic policy was not characteristic only of Jefferson and of those sharing his position. It did not as such distinguish Republican thought and conviction. Federalists, too, believed that the ends of foreign policy were not morally autonomous or self-

justifying but had to be seen as means to the ends of society, that is, the ends of individuals. Certainly, Hamilton believed this. As much as Jefferson, he belonged to those who, in George Kennan's telling division, wish to conduct foreign policy in order to live rather than live in order to conduct foreign policy. When Hamilton replied to Charles Pinckney of South Carolina in the Federal Convention that the distinction Pinckney had sought to draw between a government capable of making its citizens "happy at home" and one that made them "respectable abroad" was an "ideal distinction," he said nothing that supported the principle endorsing the primacy of foreign policy. The distinction was ideal, Hamilton argued, for the reason that "tranquility and happiness at home" depended on "sufficient stability and strength to make us respectable abroad."⁹

The difference in this critical respect between Hamilton and Jefferson did not arise over the desirability, in principle, of subordinating foreign to domestic policy, but over the prospects for doing so in practice. Jefferson saw the circumstances marking the early life of the republic as placing the United States in a far stronger international position than did Hamilton—an optimistic judgment that rested on the value of American commerce to the European powers. This conviction underlay the strategy of peaceable coercion Jefferson followed in his second administration, a strategy that, in the form of the embargo of 1807-09, led to such disastrous results. Had he been right about the nature of the American position, the new republic clearly would have been in a far stronger position in relation to Britain and France, the chief rivals in the great armed struggle then raging, than proved to be the case. In the event, the embargo demonstrated that the leverage Jefferson had expected to enjoy from commerce was misplaced and that the attempt to exploit such leverage as the nation did possess worked a harder necessity than did war itself.

The logic of the embargo was to give a primacy to foreign policy that has remained to this day as onerous as any the nation has experienced. The measures taken to implement the embargo brought much of the economy to a virtual standstill, whereas the measures taken to enforce it brought Massachusetts and Connecticut to the verge of rebellion. Yet great as the financial, political and moral costs of the embargo were, it proved a failure. Taken to escape the alternatives of national humiliation or war, it led first to humiliation and then, ultimately, to war. The system of war that Jefferson had hoped beyond hope to reform by the embargo was not reformed, and this despite his commitment to take any and all measures necessary to give effect to the embargo. That in the end Jefferson came close to embracing measures which called into question almost every principle of government he professed to believe was the ironic though inevitable result of attempting to defy the limits imposed on the statesman.

In part, of course, this ironic outcome must be traced to events in Europe that were not of Jefferson's doing. In greater part, however, the dominant role of foreign policy

during his presidency followed from the domestic vision that Jefferson and Republicans generally entertained, a vision that dictated an active and assertive foreign policy. Although Jefferson had a profoundly isolationist outlook, one that might have been expected to lead to passivity and avoidance of conflict in foreign policy, his vision of domestic society was contingent upon the fulfillment of expansive territorial and commercial goals.

By contrast, his great Federalist adversary, Hamilton, entertained a view of the nation's internal development that was far better suited to a policy of isolation. It was the Republicans rather than the Federalists who had, by virtue of their domestic vision, a greater dependence on foreign policy and, accordingly, a greater need to accept the primacy of foreign policy. For it was the Republicans who defined domestic welfare and happiness in such a way as to make the realization of these ends-ends that were equated with the very continuity of the nation-dependent largely upon external change.

Did the primacy of foreign policy nevertheless have a meaning in Jefferson's statecraft that was essentially different from the meaning given it in the statecraft of the ancien régime? In its classic meaning, the necessities imposed by the vital interests of the state overrode all other interests. In Jefferson's hand, the primacy of foreign policy took on much the same meaning. What he regarded as the necessities of the state and nation overrode other principles and interests that appeared to jeopardize these necessities, including principles that had otherwise commanded his undeviating allegiance.

Thus it was that, as president, Jefferson abandoned his constitutional scruples rather than run the risk that Louisiana, purchased from France in 1803, might be lost as a consequence of adhering to them. So, too, the subsequent diplomacy over East and West Florida demonstrated the ingenuity and single-mindedness of Jefferson in the cause of expanding the nation's territory, but scarcely showed devotion to principle, particularly such principle as might operate to inhibit expansion.

In his determination to acquire the Floridas, Jefferson evidenced not the slightest hesitation in siding with Napoleon against the freedom of those who were resisting the great Corsican's efforts to reduce them to submission. Although the black people of Santo Domingo had by their desperate struggle successfully resisted Napoleon's plan to enslave them anew, and by so doing had prevented the French from undertaking at a critical point the military occupation of New Orleans, Jefferson showed no sympathy for their plight. Instead, he sought to appease Napoleon and to enlist support for American claims to West Florida by appearing to embargo American trade with the island. Again, when the Spanish nation in May 1808 rose up in resistance to Napoleon, Jefferson, while voicing in private his sympathy for Spain's struggle, did

not seriously consider deviating from a policy that in effect supported the French effort. In this instance as well, a response that appeared indifferent to the cause of a nation's freedom was motivated in large part by the hope that Napoleon might at last favor the American aspiration to the Floridas.

In national memory, no association comes more readily to mind than that between Jefferson and liberty; yet from the vantage point of 1808, nothing seems more absurd. For then a foreign policy dedicated to the vindication of neutral rights ranged the United States against the Spanish patriots fighting for their freedom against Napoleon—and as it would later, under Madison's administration, place the United States against the whole European movement to throw off Napoleon's domination. At home it produced violations of civil liberties on a scale that would not be equaled in American history until the Civil War.

V

For most of his life, Jefferson championed a policy of isolation for the new nation. In doing so he joined his voice to that of many others. The desire to pursue a political destiny separate from Europe enjoyed a virtual consensus among the founding generation of American statesmen.

The classic expression of the desirability of pursuing a policy of isolation from Europe is George Washington's Farewell Address of 1796. In it, Washington declared:

The great rule of conduct for us in regard to foreign nations is, in extending our commercial relations, to have with them as little political connection as possible. . . . Europe has a set of primary interests which to us have none or a very remote relation. Hence she must be engaged in frequent controversies, the causes of which are essentially foreign to our concerns. Hence, therefore, it must be unwise in us to implicate ourselves by artificial ties in the ordinary vicissitudes of her politics, or the ordinary combinations and collisions of her friendships or enmities. Our detached and distant situation invites and enables us to pursue a different course.

The "different course" advised was "to steer clear of permanent alliances with any portion of the foreign world, so far . . . as we are now at liberty to do it" and to "safely trust to temporary alliances for extraordinary emergencies."¹⁰

Drafted by Hamilton, Washington's advice was cast in qualified and tentative terms. The "great rule of conduct" was not set forth as an absolute principle that represented, whatever the circumstances, the timeless interests of the nation, but as a policy for a state of only modest power that was consolidating a newly won independence and a still precarious security. It expressed what Washington and Hamilton considered the

true interest of the nation in the given circumstances ("our detached and distant situation"). It reflected no expectation that the system of European politics might soon be changed. Instead, it intimated that the European system would persist and that this country should take such advantages as it could from "so peculiar a situation."

Was the outlook embodied in the Farewell Address the outlook of Jefferson as well? Certainly, Jefferson may reasonably be cited to the same effect with respect to policy. In March of 1799 he wrote to a friend:

I sincerely join you in abjuring all political connection with every foreign power; and tho I cordially wish well to the progress of liberty in all nations, and would forever give it the weight of our countenance, yet they are not to be touched without contamination from their other bad principles. Commerce with all nations, alliance with none, should be our motto.¹¹

Jefferson would not have expressed himself thus in the early years of the decade: he would not have spoken in terms that implied the moral equivalence of "all nations," including France. Then, as secretary of state, he had equated the fate of the French Revolution with that of liberty everywhere. Were France to go down before the might of the First Coalition, he had believed, its defeat could be expected to result in the permanent ascendancy of the enemies of liberty in America. The cause of republicanism would seriously decline and perhaps even perish.

It was largely out of this same conviction that Jefferson in 1793 wished to intervene in the European conflict, not by abandoning America's neutral status but by insisting on a view of neutral rights that would work to France's distinct advantage. That the course he favored would presumably also accomplish the goal of freeing this country from Britain's economic domination made it doubly desirable. But Washington did not respond in the way Jefferson desired. Unwilling to play a high-stakes game that might draw the country into war, he did not accept Jefferson's strategy of making American neutrality contingent upon a British acceptance of an expansive definition of neutral rights. Nor did Congress adopt the Republicans' proposals to discriminate against British commerce. Confronted by a possible war with Great Britain, the Washington administration ultimately settled on a less ambitious understanding of neutral rights than Jefferson desired, and entered into an accommodation with England-the Jay Treaty-that Jefferson detested.

The year 1793 marks Jefferson's first attempt-tentative and qualified as it was-to intervene in the great conflict brought on by the French Revolution. The second occurred in 1807-09 and took the form of the embargo, Jefferson's great experiment in peaceable coercion. As before, a particular interpretation of the rights of neutrals was championed that tilted heavily in support of France. In this second effort, however, the

hope and expectation that informed the first was gone. With the coming to power of Napoleon in 1799, Jefferson no longer found moral importance in the European war. A conflict once endowed with profound moral significance, the outcome of which Jefferson had identified with the future of liberty, was now viewed as a mere struggle for power between the "tyrant on land" and the "tyrant of the ocean."

Jefferson continued to insist on the moral equivalence of France and Great Britain to the end of their armed struggle. In his view, there was no room for the consideration that the one belligerent-the "tyrant of the ocean"-was defending the international order within which America could enjoy a basic security, whereas the other belligerent-the "tyrant on land"-was intent on destroying this order and the security of the states that formed it.

Nor was this refusal to differentiate between the belligerents essentially qualified by Jefferson's occasional bow to balance-of-power considerations. After Trafalgar and Austerlitz, he had insisted that "our wish ought to be that he who has armies may not have the dominion of the sea, and that he who has dominion of the sea may be one who has no armies."¹² But the "wish" that he expressed in 1806 did not inform the policy he pursued in 1807-09. So enraged was he over English transgressions of neutral rights that he no longer troubled himself over the danger that "he who has armies" might gain "the dominion of the sea." He acknowledged his change of attitude by confessing that it was "mortifying that we should be forced to wish success to Bonaparte, and to look to his victories as our salvation." He had never expected that he would be placed in this position. "But the English being equally tyrannical at sea as he is on land, & that tyranny bearing on us in every point of either honor or interest, I say, 'down with England' and as for what Bonaparte is then to do with us, let us trust to the chapter of accidents." Dismissing the prospect of danger from Napoleon even in the event of a conquest of Britain as "hypothetical" and "chimerical," Jefferson's true policy was to assert neutral rights against England and otherwise trust to "the chapter of accidents" to preserve a balance of power. Given that outlook, there could be no outcome other than a policy that objectively favored the "tyrant on land."¹³

Though separated by a decade and a half, these two critical episodes illuminate the tension in Jefferson between the desire to reform the international system and the desire to remain separate from it. Reformation could come only as a result of successfully imposing one's will on the system, or, at least, on a significant part of it. But this could prove difficult and dangerous. Men and nations being what they are, the world is resistant to reform. Whatever their initial intention, those bent on reform, and therefore on intervention, have generally had to resort to the sword. This Jefferson did not want and had no intention of doing. Force threatened the very interests for which he had sought reform.

The result of this reasoning could only lead to withdrawal. If the state system could not be reformed, it had to be abandoned. Then Jefferson could speak of the desirability of "Chinese isolation" and of the need to place "an ocean of fire between us and the old world."

Jefferson's isolationism reflected an outlook that was unwilling to come to terms with the political world of his time. In its essential features, this outlook expressed a true isolation, a real separateness, from the international system. In this vital respect, as in others, it was profoundly parochial. Unable to adjust to the existing world, it pointed either to the withdrawal from that world or to the attempt to reform it by imposing one's will on it.

Jefferson was the first president who sought to reform the international system. He was not the last. In the history of the nation's encounter with the world, the themes of withdrawal and reformation are deeply embedded and apparent throughout. They have formed the enduring characteristics of the American outlook on the world. For Jefferson, as for subsequent American statesmen, the desire to change the world was at war with the desire not to be corrupted by the world. The desire to change the world sprang, for the most part, from the conviction that only in a changed world could republican institutions in America flourish and be secure. But the very attempt to change the world incurred the risk of contamination by it, for the methods by which it had been changed in the past were those that held out the greatest threat to republican institutions.

VI

Of all the nation's enduring traditions that Jefferson so influenced, none is more striking in its significance than the deeply ingrained inwardness of national feeling that marks to this day the American outlook. Foreign observers have always been impressed by this trait, which they have not hesitated to identify with the parochialism of Americans. That it should be traced in part to so cosmopolitan a figure as Jefferson cannot but appear paradoxical. Yet in this as in so many other respects there were two quite different sides to Jefferson, just as there have been two quite different sides to the nation.

A vision of man's future that was as grand as it was timeless was joined to a view that seemed not only unwilling but almost unable to transcend, however modestly, the particular interests of the state. This combination of the universal and the particular is bound to create difficulties when applied to the realm of diplomacy. For the outlook that informs a successful diplomacy must fall somewhere between these two perspectives. The grand vision is too elevated to make meaningful and effective contact with political reality, while the parochial view is too self-centered to achieve

the kind of compromise diplomatic solutions normally require. Jefferson's diplomacy nevertheless encompassed both of these perspectives and on more than one occasion sought to combine them in a manner that would give the nation's particular interests a universal significance.

The maritime crisis in Jefferson's second administration illustrates these two sides of Jefferson's diplomatic outlook just as it illustrates his almost inveterate propensity to convert issues of interest into matters in which great moral principles were held to be at stake. The conflict with England over impressment and neutral rights was marked from first to last by a view that seemed incapable of giving serious consideration to any interests, let alone to the possible legitimacy of any interests, save those of the neutral. That England was engaged in a war for its very survival as a great power, that the ferocity of the hegemonic struggle with France made British adherence to neutral rights as defined by the Jefferson administration difficult to reconcile with survival, and that on the outcome of the conflict depended the preservation of the balance of power, which was the only safeguard, inadequate though it had always been, of any neutral rights—all of these considerations counted for very little against the rights America insistently advanced.

Unwilling to consider these rights in relation to a larger diplomatic constellation, Jefferson remained equally unwilling to consider the kinds of compromise that might have substantially eased, if not entirely resolved, the conflict with Great Britain. Such compromise was viewed as a betrayal not merely of interest but of "the laws of nature on the ocean" that interest presumably reflected. There was no room for normal diplomatic give and take in the position Jefferson came to embrace. For that position identified the pursuit of self-interest with the vindication of sacred right.

It was not only the maritime crisis with England that revealed these traits. They were equally apparent in the diplomacy of American territorial expansion. No chapter of American diplomacy would appear to lend itself less to the category of a morality tale than the diplomacy over the Floridas. From start to finish it was attended by threats made on behalf of what were, at best, dubious claims. Yet it is not so much the diplomatic tactics employed against Spain that are revealing but the moral judgment Jefferson made of those tactics (which had stopped short of the use of force). They reflected, he insisted, America's respect for the France of Napoleon and, of course, this nation's sense of forbearance even against a Spanish nation that had supposedly, in the course of the dispute over the Floridas, set a record in perfidy and injustice.

What may account for a diplomatic outlook that combined such disparate perspectives? In large measure, surely, the explanation must be found in the conviction that identified the nation's fate with the fate of freedom in the world. If the security and well-being of the United States were inseparable from the prospects of

free government everywhere, as Jefferson was so deeply persuaded, it followed that American interests were invested with a sanctity that exempted them from the kind of compromise endemic to diplomacy. If America was the last, best hope for the cause of freedom in the world, it was apparent that the justice and rectitude of its diplomatic behavior followed by virtue of this historic role. The combination of universalism and parochialism is the result of a self-consciousness over role that forms a constant in the nation's history.

A belief in the justice of American behavior does not settle the issue of what that behavior should be. A conviction that the role of the nation is to promote the cause of liberty does not settle the issue of how that cause is to be served. Nor was there need to resolve this matter in the early history of the republic. Whether the United States should serve as an exemplar or a crusader on freedom's behalf could scarcely prove a meaningful question then, given the precarious position of the new nation and the modest power at its disposal. It is only in the twentieth century that this question has taken on a meaning and relevance it could not earlier possess.

The case for concluding that Jefferson intended the nation to serve in the role of exemplar of freedom rather than crusader for freedom may be summarized thus. Given what he saw as the conditions of other peoples and the circumstances marking their development, Jefferson became increasingly skeptical over the prospects for the spread of liberty. Freedom was a plant, he often observed, that could grow and flourish only in a favorable environment. That environment was present in America, but could it be found-or developed-elsewhere?

As Jefferson grew older, he entertained growing doubt. That doubt was not consistently adhered to even in later years; from time to time his innate optimism would have out. Still, his disillusionment over the course of the French Revolution ended the only real "enthusiasm" he ever entertained regarding the imminent prospects for liberty among the nations of Europe. Of the governments of Europe, he wrote to James Monroe in 1823, "All their energies are expended in the destruction of the labor, property and lives of their people."¹⁴ Thus it was, thus it always had been and, Jefferson finally came close to believing, thus it always would be. A continent the nations of which were doomed-if only by virtue of their proximity-to never-ending rivalries and wars was one that also afforded small prospects for the development of free institutions.

Nor did he think these prospects any better among the peoples of this hemisphere. "What kind of government will they establish? How much liberty can they bear without intoxication?"¹⁵ These questions Jefferson put to Alexander von Humboldt in 1811, at a time when the revolutionary movement in Latin America promised to result in several independent nations. The answer he eventually gave was pessimistic. While

wars were the "natural state of man" in Europe, in Central and South America the new nations were made up of "priest-ridden" peoples.¹⁶ Writing in 1818 to John Adams, who shared his views on this matter, Jefferson observed that while the peoples to the south "will succeed against Spain . . . the dangerous enemy is within their own breasts. Ignorance and superstition will chain their minds and bodies under religious and military despotism."¹⁷ At the same time, he went on to declare that "it is our duty to wish them independence and self-government, because they wish it themselves; and they have the right, and we none, to choose for themselves, and I wish, moreover, that our ideas may be erroneous, and theirs prove well founded."

Even if Jefferson had seen the world as being more receptive to the institutions of freedom than he did in his later years, there still would have remained strong reservations on his part to taking up the role of crusader for freedom. Any role that went beyond exemplar necessarily incurred the risk of war. But that risk in turn raised prospects-executive aggrandizement, debt, taxes and so on-that Jefferson believed were fatal to republican institutions. The role of the crusader was to change the world. Yet even for the powerful crusader, the effort to reform a world resistant to change thus raised the prospect of corruption. Jefferson's sensitivity to that prospect and the intensity of his desire to escape it were proverbial.

These considerations weigh heavily against any attempt to make of Jefferson the crusader for freedom in the world. And yet a case for doing just that can be plausibly made. There is to begin with the consideration that Jefferson did not consistently find the circumstances of American society so exceptional as to preclude their emulation elsewhere. In 1801, on the eve of his inauguration as president, he wrote to John Dickinson that "a just and solid republican government maintained here will be a standing monument and example for the aim and imitation of the people of other countries."¹⁸ Although he did indeed become increasingly skeptical over the prospects for freedom elsewhere, his skepticism never quite overcame a deeper and congenial optimism. The experience of the French Revolution had been painful, in ways even shattering, but neither it nor subsequent events led Jefferson to abandon his deepest hopes and beliefs about the prospects for freedom. To John Adams he could write in 1816: "I steer my bark with Hope in the head, leaving Fear astern. My hopes indeed sometimes fail; but not oftener than the forebodings of the gloomy."¹⁹ While declaring to one correspondent in 1820 that Europe was a region "where war seems to be the natural state of man,"²⁰ he could also write on the same day to Lafayette that he was still hopeful that "the disease of liberty is catching."²¹

Then too, there were very important reasons for not abandoning hope in the prospects for freedom in the world. If one did concede that these prospects were negligible, could liberty be secure even in this country? In a world that was ruled by arbitrary power, the fate of free institutions in America would never be quite assured, however

much we might try to isolate ourselves from the world. For monarchy meant war and, despite our best efforts, Europe's wars might always spread their deadly virus to this hemisphere. Only a world made up of republics would be a world where peace was truly possible. The great and indispensable step toward promoting a lasting peace, as Madison had written in 1792 in an essay on "Universal Peace," was the replacement of monarchical governments by governments that rested on consent.²² A world made safe for republican government was a world made safe for, as well as by, peace.

The logic of arbitrary power was not only that of war, it was also the logic of a closed system. By contrast, the logic of republics was not only that of peace, but of an open system. The enduring issue that thrust an unwilling Jefferson onto the world was not political or ideological but commercial. Persuaded that the health and well-being of the American republic required an open—that is, free-trading system, Jefferson also believed that he could isolate the commercial interest from the political entanglement he was determined to avoid. But events were to show that the insistence on preserving an open trading system entailed the need to intervene against those whose efforts were directed to keeping the system closed. It did so then just as it did so again in the years that led to American intervention in the First World War.

Certainly Jefferson never consciously contemplated casting the nation in the role of crusader. He did not do so in his own day and for the most apparent and compelling of reasons. But what of the day that he was sure would come, a day when America might "shake a rod over the heads of all" and do so with relative impunity? Why should it not do so then, if doing so might contribute to America's security and well-being while also striking a blow for the cause of liberty? It was one thing to reject "a war to reform Europe" and quite another to eschew "shaking a rod" over others' heads. The former implied a course of action that might always prove disastrous for us internally, a prospect that necessarily outweighed that of attempting to replace arbitrary power elsewhere with government based on consent. The latter held out a far different course, one that promised reformation of the international system at but modest cost. Such a course was in the tradition of "peaceable coercion," and it is difficult to understand why Jefferson should reject it.

To the degree that Jefferson never abandoned his earlier conviction of America serving as an exemplar to the world, the temptation persisted to equate, at some point and in some circumstances, the role of exemplar with more than just a passive stance. The conventional contrast of the roles of exemplar and crusader has often obscured the affinity that may also exist between them. A marked self-consciousness about serving as an exemplar may well act, under the proper circumstances, as a standing temptation to go beyond that role. The same sentiments that find gratification or fulfillment by serving in the role of exemplar also sustain at some point the role of crusader.

On the issue of the nation's proper role in the world, then, Jefferson's legacy remains ultimately ambiguous. It is this ambiguity, among others, that lends Jefferson's name to such conflicting uses in the never-ending debate over the purposes of American foreign policy. Among the statesmen of the early republic, he is more responsible than any for warning of the hazards that must attend the role of crusader. Yet he is also the statesman more responsible than any for evoking the perennial attractions of this role.

1 Letter from Jefferson to the "Citizens of Washington," March 4, 1809, in Andrew A. Lipscomb and Albert Bergh, eds., *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, vol. XVI, Washington, D.C.: The Thomas Jefferson Memorial Association, 1903-05, pp. 347-348.

2 Paul Leicester Ford, ed., *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1892-99, vol. VII, p. 343.

3 "The Rights of Man" (1791), in *The Writings of Thomas Paine*, Moncure Daniel Conway, ed., New York: AMS Press, 1967, vol. II, p. 388.

4 *The Federalist*, ed. Jacob E. Cooke, Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1961, p. 29.

5 Letter to Madame La Duchesse D'Auville, April 2, 1790, in Ford, *op. cit.*, vol. V, p. 153.

6 *Letters and Other Writings of James Madison*, Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1865, vol. IV, pp. 491-492.

7 Letter to Talleyrand, July 9, 1805, cited in Henry Adams, *History of the United States of America during the Administrations of Jefferson and Madison*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1903, vol. III, p. 85.

8 See letter to William Short, Nov. 28, 1814, in Lipscomb and Bergh, *op. cit.*, vol. XIV, p. 214: "from a peaceable and agricultural nation, [our enemy] makes us a military and manufacturing one."

9 *The Records of the Federal Convention of 1787*, Max Farrand, ed., New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1937, vol. I, pp. 466-467.

10 John C. Fitzpatrick, ed., *The Writings of George Washington 1745-1799*, Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1931-44, vol. XXXV, pp. 233-235.

11 Letter to Thomas Lomax, March 12, 1799, in Ford, *op. cit.*, vol. VII, p. 373.

12 Letter to Thomas Lomax, Jan. 11, 1806, cited in Dumas Malone, *Jefferson The President: Second Term, 1805-1809*, Boston: Little, Brown, 1974, p. 95.

13 See letter to Col. John Taylor, Aug. 1, 1807, in Lipscomb and Bergh, *op.cit.*, vol. XI, p. 305; letter to Thomas Leiper, Aug. 21, 1807, in Ford, *op. cit.*, vol. IX, p. 130; letter to John Langdon, March 5, 1810, in Lipscomb and Bergh, *op. cit.*, vol. XII, pp. 374-375.

14 Ford, *op. cit.*, vol. X, 256.

15 Letter to Baron Alexander Von Humboldt, April 14, 1811, in Lipscomb and Bergh, *op. cit.*, vol. XIII, p. 34.

16 See letter to Von Humboldt, Dec. 6, 1813, in Ford, *op. cit.*, vol. X, p. 430: "History, I believe, furnishes no example of a priest-ridden people maintaining a free civil government."

17 Ford, *op. cit.*, vol. X, p. 107.

18 Ford, *op. cit.*, vol. VIII, pp. 7-8.

19 Lipscomb and Bergh, *op. cit.*, vol. XIV, p. 467.

20 Letter to David Bailey Warden, Dec. 26, 1820, in Ford, *op. cit.*, vol. X, p. 171.

21 Letter to Lafayette, Dec. 26, 1820, in Ford, *op. cit.*, vol. X, p. 179. Also see Jefferson to Lafayette, Oct. 28, 1822, in *ibid.*, p. 227: "I will hazard . . . but the single expression of assurance that this general insurrection of the world against all tyrants will ultimately prevail by pointing the object of government to the happiness of the people and not merely to that of their self-constituted governors."

22 "As the first step towards a cure, the government itself must be regenerated. Its will must be made subordinate to, or rather the same with, the will of the community." See Gaillard Hunt, ed., *The Writings of James Madison*, New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1906, vol. VI, p. 89.

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