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Enlightened defense: The national security *policy of Thomas Jefferson

Robert R. Leonhard
West Virginia University

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**Enlightened Defense:
The National Security Policy of Thomas Jefferson**

LTC(R) Robert R. Leonhard

Dissertation submitted to
the Eberly College of Arts and Sciences
at West Virginia University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy
in
History

Michal McMahon, Phd., Chair
Mary Lou Lustig, Phd.
Kenneth Fones-Wolf, Phd.
Jack Hammersmith, Phd.
Robert DiClerico, Phd.

Department of History

Morgantown, West Virginia
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The triumph of Thomas Jefferson and the Democratic Republicans in 1800 left the deposed Federalists aghast at what this Francophile, antinationalist, reputedly atheistic president might do to the country. Despite Jefferson's impulses toward pacifism, national isolation, the diffusion of political power, and healing faction, the eight years of his two administrations were destined to be as calm as a hurricane. The turbulent situation in Europe had already made a mockery of Washington's advice to avoid entanglement, and during Jefferson's presidency, the dangers only increased.

Jefferson's ideas on national security were diametrically opposed to those of Alexander Hamilton and the Federalists. Jefferson was an advocate of states' rights, but Hamilton of centralized power. Jefferson wanted to avoid debt, while Hamilton thought debt was a positive and unifying factor. Jefferson believed in maintaining a minuscule standing military in favor of state militias, whereas Hamilton called for a huge, regular army and a sea-going navy. The debate was not an academic one: the young nation was literally surrounded by enemies and potential enemies. Spain had a stranglehold on New Orleans, and the slightest pressure there could (and sometimes did) throttle the entire economy of the American west. Britain, with a firm hold on Canada and total domination of the high seas, bullied the Americans with seemingly unfair commercial practices. When Napoleon began to restrict trade as well, Jefferson and his countrymen faced economic calamity and the threat of wars they would not likely win.

Jefferson introduced legislation that altered the structure of both the army and navy, established the military academy at West Point, and changed the political constitution of the defense establishment. He fought a long, frustrating war with Tripoli, fended off insults from Europe, and struggled to formulate an Indian policy that would protect native Americans while dealing with the reality and inevitability of white domination of the continent. Jefferson also pulled off the most spectacular land deal in history: the Louisiana Purchase—an accretion that doubled the size of the young republic and sowed the seeds for the eventual triumph of Jefferson's strategic calculations.

By the end of his second term, however, Jefferson's initial successes had been eclipsed by the disappointing results of his embargo against Great Britain. Historians roundly condemn the embargo as both ineffective and a direct violation of Jefferson's own ideas on governance. His handling of the military has also been criticized, particularly in the light of America's martial mediocrity in the War of 1812—shortfalls that can be partially attributed to Jefferson's underfunding of the army and navy.

This essay looks critically at the military and national security policies of Thomas Jefferson with a view to penetrating beyond traditional interpretations. By examining closely the political, economic, social, and military context of the times—especially the delicate domestic situation—it is possible to see Jefferson's policies with a new appreciation of how enlightened and ultimately effective they really were.

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DEDICATION

For Suzanne

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INTRODUCTION

That 'Whimsical Phylosophic President'

On 4 March, 1801 Chief Justice John Marshall administered the oath of office to newly elected President Thomas Jefferson, inaugurating not only a new administration, but a new era for the young republic. Jefferson rose to the presidency during a time when the United States was arguably at its most vulnerable, from both foreign and domestic threats. The election of 1800 left a wake of bitterness, hatred, and even fear of a bloody purge.¹ Out-going President John Adams had ungraciously fled the city at 4:00 AM that morning. Across the Atlantic Ocean, the French Revolution and the rise of Napoleon threatened to spill violence onto American shores and the possibility of war between Britain and France posed a constant threat to American commerce.

In this context, Thomas Jefferson took the reins of government. There was justification for the skepticism with which many viewed his rise to power. He was not an experienced military man. His affection for France was suspicious. His Republican views on governing were diametrically opposed to the party that alone had governed the republic since 1789. Could Thomas Jefferson function effectively as both President and Commander-in-Chief? The answer to that question was a matter of vital importance to the new nation.

¹ David McCullough, *John Adams* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001), 564.

The administration of Thomas Jefferson was uniquely situated to attract criticism. Following the “Revolution of 1800”, Jefferson’s presidency represented the first transition of power between rival political parties in American history. The two previous administrations had certainly had their detractors, but Washington himself remained, with some exceptions, above the vituperative criticism that others could attract. John Adams had to deal with his critics also, but by the end of his term of office, he had erected legal barriers to restrain his political enemies in the form of the Sedition Act. When Jefferson took office, he and the Congress allowed the hateful legislation to expire, and, in accordance with his political beliefs, he invited criticism and open debate.² During the years of his presidency and the centuries following, he got his full measure.

The reputation of the Jefferson administration still suffers from its alleged culpability concerning the marginal performance of the American military during the War of 1812. Disasters on land and near impotence on the sea demanded someone be blamed. The buck stopped first at the desk of President James Madison, but critics and historians have likewise pointed to Thomas Jefferson as the man who deliberately emasculated the army and moth-balled the navy in favor of his experimental and utterly ineffective gunboats.³ Jefferson, too, had appointed an ineffective party hack, Dr. William Eustis, as secretary of war in 1809, and Madison had kept him on.⁴

² Joyce Appleby, *Thomas Jefferson* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 2003), 58.

³ See for example, Alfred Thayer Mahan, *Sea Power and its Relations to the War of 1812* (New York: Reprint Services Corp, 1905) 1: 296; and Forrest McDonald, *The Presidency of Thomas Jefferson* (Kansas City: University of Kansas Press, 1976), 44.

Like his near contemporary, Frederick the Great, Jefferson had to wed concepts of Enlightenment and humanism with military necessity—both in his mind and in practice. Unlike Frederick, Jefferson had no prior military training. His legacy as a military commander and a strategist was therefore unique in the republic's brief history. There were difficult strategic problems for the new president to solve. Among these were homeland defense against Indians and foreign powers, the protection of American shipping, and—related to the first two—the organization of the armed forces.⁵

The last of these problems had political as well as military dimensions. Jefferson's basic conception of strategy for the land component was simple and relatively unchanged during his administration: he would rely on the "body of neighboring citizens as formed into a militia". Jefferson believed that a European invader could launch an attack at any of hundreds of different points along the extensive American seacoast, and that it was therefore unfeasible for a standing army to be the primary defense. Rather, as an invasion unfolded, the local militia would destroy the threat or contain it long enough for the regular army to arrive and finish off the enemy.⁶ But in order for this system to work, the national government would have to be on good political terms with state governors, and the states, in turn, would have to organize their militias according to a national standard.

⁴ John K. Mahon, *The War of 1812*. New York: De Capo Press, 1972; 5.

⁵ Allan R. Millet and Peter Maslowski, *For the Common Defense: a Military History of the United States of America*. New York: The Free Press, 1984, 87-102

⁶ First Inaugural Address, 4 March 1801, Washington ed., viii, 1-6.

The formula for homeland defense was thus set for Jefferson's administration: initial defensive operations by militiamen, to be followed if necessary by regular troops mustered for the purpose and dispatched to the trouble spots. The underlying assumptions, of course, were that (1) the militia would be responsive and effective; and that (2) any crisis could be either defeated or contained long enough to allow regulars to arrive. Above all, Jefferson wanted to prevent the buildup of a large, regular army, because (among other reasons) he saw it as a possible threat to democracy. Jefferson's political opponents, chiefly Alexander Hamilton, disputed both of these assumptions, and Jefferson, in turn, mistrusted the opposition's motives. In the words of Henry Adams, "To crush democracy by force was the ultimate resource of Hamilton. To crush that force was the determined intention of Jefferson."⁷

The political turmoil of the late 18th century in America came about because of the existence and development of two rival political parties in a time when such parties were considered detrimental to good governance. The initial bifurcation between Federalist and anti-Federalists over the ratification of the Constitution of 1787 had quieted somewhat under George Washington's steady hand. But despite Washington's pleas to Hamilton and Jefferson, his two chief ministers supervised a bitter newspaper war, each employing editors to denigrate the other. The emerging political parties that arose over policy disputes became known as the Federalists and Democratic Republicans. Hamilton and Jefferson

⁷ Henry Adams, *Albert Gallatin* (New York: Chelsea House, 1983), 170.

were the respective de facto heads, but the American political culture would not recognize the legitimacy of parties until much later.⁸

During the Washington and Adams administrations several proposals came forward for a strong national, regular army. But there were powerful obstacles to such schemes—chiefly lack of resources and a pervasive belief that a standing army was a threat to freedom, especially among Democratic Republicans. After the ratification of the new constitution and the election of George Washington in 1788, the Federalists attempted—mostly without success—to boost the strength of the army and build a sea-going navy. But it wasn't until the crises of John Adams' administration (1797-1801) that Hamilton's military ideas gained ascendancy. The perceived threat from France and "Jacobins" within the United States gave rise to a panicked accretion in army authorizations and appropriations for the navy.

In the years leading up to the dramatic election of 1800, Democratic Republicans railed against the enlargement of the military and its use against domestic insurrections (chiefly Fries' Rebellion of 1799). The passage of the Alien and Sedition Acts in 1798 gave rise to a sustained reaction against Hamiltonian Federalism and contributed to the vigorous political organization that underlay the Republican victory of 1800. By the time of Jefferson's election, peace with France had spurred Congress to disestablish much of Hamilton's military initiatives, but suspicion about a large military and what unscrupulous men might do with it remained.⁹

⁸ Joyce Appleby, *Thomas Jefferson* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 2003), 134.

⁹ Joseph J. Ellis, *Founding Brothers* (New York: Vintage Books, 2002), 194.

Jefferson's first term saw the passage of the Military Peace Establishment Act, which purged 88 officer positions held by Federalists and added 20 ensigns, all of whom would be Republicans. This move among others has led to a school of thought among some historians that Jefferson was determined to "Republicanize" the armed forces with a determination equal to Hamilton's.¹⁰ Reducing the army from four infantry regiments to two, the Republican legislation also brought the army's end strength down to sixty percent of its original strength. The traditional criticism of Jefferson has it that his unrealistic reliance on state militias, his naive insistence on economy, and his vengeful desire to purge the ranks of Federalist officers led him to pare the army down to a level that was destined to fail in any serious military undertaking.¹¹ Indeed, it was Jefferson who once opposed a standing army on the grounds that "we have no paupers to man it."¹² Some historians have accused Jefferson of under-funding the military to the point that it was ineffective both to awe the Indians and to deter invasion.¹³ Thus the disasters in 1812 along the Canadian border had at their root Thomas Jefferson's antipathy toward the military.

Even the ostensibly pro-military act of establishing the United States Military Academy had suspicious roots. Why would Jefferson, who opposed the academy idea when it was sponsored by Washington and Hamilton, suddenly

¹⁰ Millet and Maslowski, *For the Common Defense*, 99.

¹¹ See for example, Forrest McDonald, *The Presidency of Thomas Jefferson* (Lawrence, KS: The University Press of Kansas, 1976), 43; Anthony Wallace, *Jefferson and the Indians: the tragic fate of the first Americans* (Cambridge, Mass: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 13-20.

¹² James R. Jacobs, *The Beginning of the US Army, 1783-1812*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1947), 12.

¹³ Lance Banning, *The Jeffersonian Persuasion: evolution of a party ideology* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978), 289-90.

exert himself in favor of the idea upon the success of the Republicans in 1801? Historians Stephen Ambrose and Dumas Malone assert that Jefferson was trying to cultivate engineering and science by founding West Point, but others disagree.¹⁴ Theodore Crackel instead asserts that the United States Military Academy at West Point was part of Jefferson's plan to purge Federalists from the military.¹⁵

Likewise the navy suffered at the hands of the new president. Upon taking office Jefferson laid up the six frigates still operating, cancelled future construction, and cut appropriations to a mere one million dollars, down from \$3.5 million in 1800.¹⁶ Instead of relying on the traditional sea-going navy for defense, Jefferson, as his critics charged, lit upon a hare-brained scheme to employ hundreds of tiny gunboats. These small craft were inexpensive, easy to handle (thus removing the requirement for an aristocratic, adventurous, and largely Federalist officer corps), and would not be regarded as a provocation by other powers. New Hampshire Federalist William Plumer despised the gunboat plan and ridiculed Jefferson as “this whimsical, philosophic president”.¹⁷ During the War of 1812, the ramshackle gunboat fleet was singularly ineffective. As famed naval proponent and historian, Alfred Thayer Mahan, saw it: “Jefferson with his gunboat policy...proclaimed by act as by voice his adherence to a bare

¹⁴ See for example, Dumas Malone, *Jefferson and His Times: the Sage of Monticello* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1981), 235.

¹⁵ Theodore J. Crackel, *Mr. Jefferson's Army: political and social reform of the military establishment, 1801-1804* (New York: New York University, 1987), 59-62.

¹⁶ Gene A. Smith, *For Purposes of Defense: the politics of the Jeffersonian Gunboat Program*. Newark, NJ: University of Delaware Press, 1995; 11.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 33-34.

defensive.”¹⁸ His criticism of Jefferson informed generations of American historians, who likewise pointed to the president’s military incapacity.¹⁹

The combined effects of these attacks on the American military were to weaken the country—or more specifically the national government—for years to come. Forrest McDonald argues that—

“The long-range implications of these false economies were to reduce the military capacities of the United States to virtually nothing, and thus to tie the nation’s hands in its foreign relations far more than Hamiltonian policy ever had.”²⁰

McDonald delivers a yet more stinging rebuke in discussing Jefferson’s demands upon Great Britain following the infamous *Chesapeake* incident:

“But one does not bind one’s self hand and foot and then issue ultimatums... the achievements of Hamiltonian Federalism had all been undone; after six and a half years of Jeffersonian Republicanism, the Americans were more dependent upon the whim of George III and the will of his ministers in 1807 than they had been in 1775.”²¹

The most obvious and tragic result of this emasculation was the ill-fated Embargo Act of 1807. The “half-way pacifist” president, faced with clear and provocative acts of war by England, chose to employ an economic weapon rather than have recourse to military action. Waves of protest, defiance, and disobedience followed as Federalist merchants in the northeast faced loss of their livelihoods. Jefferson himself concluded that the embargo was a singular

¹⁸ Alfred Thayer Mahan, *War of 1812*, (New York: Reprint Services Corp., 1905), 1:296.

¹⁹ See for example, Russell F. Weigley, *The American War of War: a History of United States Military Strategy and Policy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973), 46-47.

²⁰ McDonald, *The Presidency of Thomas Jefferson*, 44.

²¹ *Ibid*, 136-37.

failure, and the great irony was that in enforcing it he became every bit the tyrant he so feared in others. A more obvious strategic failure would be hard to find.

Historians Henry Adams, Paul Leicester Ford, Forrest McDonald, Joyce Appleby and others have likewise pointed to the hypocrisy of Jefferson, who by 1808 employed federal troops to replace New England militias in the enforcement of the embargo.²² Late in 1808, the president, who had once opposed a call for a 12,000 man force, requested an army of 50,000!²³ Since Jefferson had a long, public record of tying standing armies in times of peace to tyranny, one could interpret his call for a larger military as his intention to pursue a Republican form of tyranny. This at least was the fear of his Federalist foes.

Likewise in his handling of Indian affairs, Jefferson comes under the criticism of Anthony Wallace, who views Jefferson as an ethically flawed, hypocritical, and incompetent dilettante. Ostensibly sympathizing with the noble savages in his *Notes on Virginia*, Jefferson nevertheless pursued policies inimical to their survival in order to further his own interests in land speculation as well as those of his political cronies.²⁴ According to Wallace, Jefferson intended, as explained in his first inaugural address, to eradicate the Indians' way of life and convert them to agriculture, while snatching up their lands for white settlers. At the same time he cut the size of the army to a mere 3, 289 officers and men in

²² See for example Paul L. Ford, ed., *The Autobiography of Thomas Jefferson, 1743-1790* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), i-ix; Joyce Appleby, *Thomas Jefferson* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 2003), 128-130; Forrest McDonald, *The Presidency of Thomas Jefferson* (Lawrence, KS: The University Press of Kansas, 1976), 137.

²³ Jefferson, *The Anas*, July, 1807, Ford ed., i, 329.; see also Theodore J. Crackel, *Mr. Jefferson's Army: political and social reform of the military establishment, 1801-1804*. New York: New York University, 1987; 181.

²⁴ Anthony Wallace, *Jefferson and the Indians: the tragic fate of the First Americans*. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999, 1-12.

the Military Peace Establishment Act of 1802—a force entirely too small to restrain white settlers from encroaching on Indian lands.²⁵

Jefferson's handling of the Tripolitan War, 1801-05, likewise attracts criticism. Having virtually disestablished the navy prior to the war, Jefferson was forced to employ the Federalist frigates, sloops, and schooners that he had previously under-funded. Punctuated by episodes of heroism and small successes, the war dragged on for four and a half years. Its end came about through the adventuring of William Eaton, the very 'man who would be king' that Jefferson most feared. Hence the war with Tripoli has every appearance of being fought with no one at the helm.²⁶

It seems obvious at a glance, then, that Jefferson was ineffective in his roles as commander-in-chief and the nation's chief administrator. But the obvious is difficult to prove and sometimes wrong. In order to judge accurately the course of Jefferson's administration in strategic and military matters, it is necessary to view the problem in the context of early 19th century America, rather than from the viewpoint of citizens of a superpower two centuries later. Context is everything when evaluating an enigmatic person such as Jefferson.

From my research I have developed views about Thomas Jefferson's national security policies that differ from most published works. Historians can find it difficult to filter out subtle prejudices and can sometimes attempt to retrofit

²⁵ Ibid, 216.

²⁶ Max Boot, *The Savage Wars of Peace* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 12.

modern ideas onto the past. Such is the case with current views on Jefferson's military policies.

Modern evaluation of Thomas Jefferson's military policy suffers from viewing the problem in retrospect through the wrong lenses. The first lens is that of a world superpower. Since the late 19th century, the United States of America has become the most prominent player within the community of nations. Our culture of success and strength blinds us to the realities of Jefferson's country in 1800. When evaluating Republican domestic and foreign policy from 1801 through 1809, critics often fail to consider the fundamental weakness of the United States in terms of military manpower and the arms industry. As a result, commentators view unfavorable episodes like our disappointing performance against the Barbary pirates, the ill-fated Embargo Act of 1807, and later, America's marginal military performance in the War of 1812 as the result of Republican policy-making, when in fact they are more attributable to the young nation's inherent strategic limitations. The United States had a small population, primitive infrastructure, a vulnerable coastline, and almost no arms industry. Hence, regardless of the administration's policies, America was bound to fall short in its foreign policy ambitions until the Industrial Revolution could take hold and impel it to prosperity and strength.

A fair evaluation of Jefferson must therefore take into account other potential policy options and their likely outcomes. In this light, for example, one can condemn the Embargo of 1807 yet still perceive correctly that other options—most notably war with Britain—would likely have fared even worse.

The War of 1812, just five years later, demonstrated America's military incapacity. To explore possible permutations of the nation's history it is necessary to examine the historical context and then critically analyze the major policy options by which Jefferson and the Republican Congress shaped the military establishment and the nation's foreign policy. By thus comparing what they did with possible alternatives, we can better evaluate Jefferson as commander-in-chief. We may discover that the critics were right in some instances, but that in others, this "whimsical, philosophic president" had greater insights than his detractors.

The second lens through which we tend to view Jefferson's administration is that of a modern, stable, functioning democracy. We have over two centuries of history behind us during which the Constitution was tried, modified, and proven. Each age of our nation has produced its own set of calamities and political dramas, including a bloody civil war, but the system of checks and balances has since then proven resilient enough to provide for stable governance of the nation. The notion of a coup, secession, or a series of bloody purges among our politicians is the stuff of good fiction, but in 1800, such things were distinctly possible. The Constitution was a mere eleven years old, and there had been only one party in control since the beginning. (Indeed, the Federalists scarcely recognized themselves as a 'party', but rather as the only legitimate government.) The concept of a unified polity—one that could withstand the passions of democracy and party conflict—was very much in question, and the idea of a legitimate "loyal opposition" was nonexistent.

Much of Jefferson's policy formulation aimed at forestalling a falling back to rule by the privileged few on the one hand, and the violence and upheaval of the French Revolution on the other. Thus his military policy had to balance both the demands of the turbulent European situation and the internal threat of a political or military coup. Threat of secession by one or more states was a regular feature of those years, culminating, of course, in the crisis of 1861. With the shared depredations at the hands of Great Britain fading away as a unifying force, early 19th century America was a crucible of divisive issues, restive political factions, and competing visions of what America should be. It is only against this backdrop that Jefferson's policies can be fairly judged.

What follows, then, is a critical examination of Thomas Jefferson's military policies with a view to the context of his time. Evaluating the outcomes of Jefferson's decision making must include comparing them to likely alternative outcomes—war with Britain or France, a military coup, a secession crisis, or full-scale civil war. Against this backdrop and the consequences that might have followed for the young republic, the disappointing results of Jefferson's embargo, and the stagnation of the War of 1812 may suddenly appear as startling successes.

CHAPTER ONE

The Origins of a Military Policy

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Thomas Jefferson's background, education, and pre-war experiences shaped his thoughts on military policy well in advance of his taking the reins of government in 1801. From these factors emerged Jefferson's earliest thinking on the military. During the years leading up to the achievement of American independence, Jefferson's ideas about military policy were conditioned by two sources: his reading and the colonial experience with the British army. Only later, when Jefferson participated in the administrations of Washington and Adams, was his thinking influenced by experience in governing.

In his book, *The Jeffersonian Persuasion*, Lance Banning takes on the task of defining Republican "ideology", which he defines as "the more or less coherent body of assumptions, values, and ideas that bound Republicans together as it shaped their common understanding of society and politics..."²⁷ He examines the political struggles during the English Civil War (1642-51), the Restoration (1660-61), and the Glorious Revolution (1688-89), a period rich with

political commentary. Jefferson and his allies assimilated and often exaggerated the principles of opposition that grew out of that dramatic period of British history, and the management of the military figured prominently in the ongoing debate. A voracious and critical reader, Jefferson learned to view the military establishment not only from the standpoint of patriotism, nationalism, and security from invasion, but also as an instrument of political corruption, repression of liberty, and potentially, tyranny.

But Thomas Jefferson was not the product of just book learning. As a young man he was ensconced in the practical struggle against Great Britain, and the young aristocrat was to observe firsthand the use of redcoats to suppress civil rights. British grenadiers were often the most conspicuous and offensive face of London's American policy. In the years leading up to the Revolution, the army upheld the authority of royal governors and supervised the sometimes repressive commercial and political measures passed by the ministry in London. In the course of leading his native state of Virginia as a wartime governor, Jefferson had to escape on horseback when British soldiers sought to arrest him during an invasion.

In this chapter, I will demonstrate that long before he came to office as a minister to France and later Secretary of State, Thomas Jefferson's thoughts on military policy matured from his reading and personal experience.

²⁷ Lance Banning, *The Jeffersonian Persuasion: evolution of a party ideology* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978), 15.

The Education of a Revolutionary

Thomas Jefferson was born April 13, 1743, the third child and first son of Peter and Jane Jefferson. His birth into the community of the Virginia gentry set the conditions for a life of social and economic success, but it could not account for his singular rise to the height of American politics, nor for the profound influence Jefferson would have on the course of American history. His unique intellectual talents and quiet determination, his spirit of unlimited inquiry, and his remarkable self-restraint marked him as a man destined for greatness. But once he chose the path he thought most moral and ethical his inner strength led him to defy first his mother country, and second, the men he had thrown in with during the Revolution. By 1800, he had in fact created what he called a second revolution in which Jefferson would steer the country's policies in the direction he saw fit—a vector radically different from that of George Washington or John Adams. It is in his education and early experiences in politics that one can find the origins of Jefferson's thinking about politics in general, and military policy in particular.

Jefferson had a classical education in Albemarle County, where he learned Greek and Latin, and where he began a lifelong love affair with books. At age 17 he moved to Williamsburg and entered the College of William and Mary. There he came under the tutelage of Dr. William Small, a layman who instructed Jefferson in science and mathematics. This experience fanned the flame of inquiry within young Thomas, and thereafter he preferred what he

considered “useful” education to the classics. Eventually, he would connect classical education to the perpetuation of privilege and the stagnation of American society. At a young age, Jefferson became a son of the Age of Reason.²⁸

After two years at college, Jefferson began to study law under George Wythe, an undertaking that would last five years and provide a firm foundation for his later sponsorship of the rights of man. His initiation into the works of seventeenth century legal scholar Sir Edward Coke acquainted the aspiring lawyer with the thinking of the Puritan opposition to James I (b. 1566; reigned 1603-1625) and Charles I (b. 1600; reigned 1625-1649). Since Coke and his colleagues framed their conflict with the crown in terms of the rights and liberties of man, Jefferson became well grounded in the developing ideology of the Enlightenment.²⁹ Puritan thought included a rejection of the divine right of kings, the advocacy of popular sovereignty, and a reaffirmation of the conviction that no one was above the law—this last point deeply rooted in English tradition, dating back at least as far as the Magna Carta (1215).

Whig ideology blossomed in the late 1670s and early 80s during the opposition to James, duke of York (b. 1633; reigned 1685-1701), who succeeded Charles II (b. 1630; reigned 1660-1685). Since James was openly Catholic, he attracted the ire and dogged disapproval of the Whigs, led by the Earl of Shaftesbury (1621-1683). Fearful of corruption, tyranny, and religious

²⁸ Noble E. Cunningham, Jr., *In Pursuit of Reason: the Life of Thomas Jefferson* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1987), 1-13.

²⁹ Robert M. Johnstone, Jr., *Jefferson and the Presidency: Leadership in the Young Republic* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978), 37-40.

repression, the Whigs struggled to formulate and define a proper government—one immune to the encroachments of man’s base nature. James Harrington’s work, *The Commonwealth of Oceana*, published in 1656, described the ideal of a “mixed government”—i.e., rule by a combination of monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy—described by King Charles I in 1642 as “the one, the few, and the many”.³⁰ Whigs believed that the separate elements of mixed government would serve as a check on tyranny.³¹

Harrington, Algernon Sidney, and others also saw the dangers of corruption, which sprung ultimately from one’s economic dependence upon another. Since only an independent man was free from the danger of corruption, it followed that land ownership should be the basis for the franchise. Reason must prevail over self-interest, and Harrington railed against the evil of hereditary offices and standing armies as constant threats to liberty. Thomas Jefferson’s world view grew from these doctrinal roots.³²

Restoration England was governed by the “king-in-parliament”, who had the right to dismiss ministers at will. Ministers, in turn, used patronage and bribery to interfere with elections and voting. John Locke (1632-1704) and others railed against this practice, because it put too much influence in the hands of the executive. In *A Letter from a Person of Quality to His Friend in the Country* (1675), thought to have been written by Shaftesbury, the author argues against a professional army (seen as both an expense and a direct threat to liberty), and in

³⁰ James Harrington, *The Commonwealth of Oceana*, 1656. 16 June 2005
<<http://www.constitution.org/jh/oceana.htm>>.

³¹ For an in-depth development of Jefferson’s ideology, see Lance Banning, *The Jeffersonian Persuasion: evolution of a party ideology* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978).

favor of an hereditary nobility as the people's champions to balance the power of the crown.³³

Commenting in the mid-eighteenth century on how the English constitution evolved, Charles de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu (1689-1755) continued the conceptual development of mixed and balanced government by emphasizing the value of virtue. He defined virtue as the seeking of public good over personal gain and its theoretical converse, corruption, as the spreading rot of embezzlement, bribery, and drive for personal gain. Because virtue was always at risk of being overcome by man's baser nature, a mixed and balanced government was the best protection against what would otherwise be unchecked corruption. Again, it was the independent land owner who could best stand firm against evil and fight for public good, while anyone dependent on another—a stock holder, a pensioner, or a wage earner—would ultimately succumb to the influence of his patron.³⁴

Whig ideology also held that no matter how vigilant the opposition or virtuous the ministry, government would inevitably slip into evil and corruption, and that only a dramatic, decisive return to first principles would restore virtue. Whigs viewed this cycle as both inevitable and beneficial, and Jefferson's later characterization of his own election in 1800 reflected this belief as well. By the latter years of John Adams' administration, Jefferson viewed the Federalists' policies and Hamilton's plans as thoroughly corrupt—a rejection and repudiation

³² James Harrington, *The Commonwealth of Oceana*.

³³ Lance Banning, *The Jeffersonian Persuasion*, 44.

³⁴ Charles de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu, *The Spirit of Laws*, Books III, VIII., trans. Thomas Nugent, 1752. 16 June 2005. <<http://www.constitution.org/cm/sol.txt>.>

of the principles of 1776. Jefferson, as the ultimate champion of the Enlightenment, would restore virtue to government. This ideology in no small way framed his perspectives on the military.³⁵

Cato's Letters, written by John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon and published from 1720-23, praised English liberty and compared it favorably to the popery and tyranny found elsewhere in the world. But the authors of this influential work also warned that the court, in its never-ending attempts to subvert liberty, would consistently seek to raise taxes, form armies, and fight foreign wars to distract the country from encroaching corruption and tyranny. Hence, Whigs were predisposed to be alarmed at any schemes of government that called for taxes or an accretion in the strength of the military.³⁶

In 1701, Charles Davenant published *The True Picture of a Modern Whig*, which detailed the financial activities of the Whig government. The author played upon the suspicions and paranoia of the opposition to cause alarm, both in England and in America, whenever the government attempted to regulate domestic trade. Jefferson's reactions to Hamiltonian financial policy proposals followed this line, and the vastly divergent ideological convictions of both men foreordained conflict over the proper course for the republic.³⁷

Henry St. John, Viscount Bolingbroke's (1678-1751) Tory opposition to Sir Robert Walpole's Whig ministry (1721-1742) also contributed to the development

³⁵ Susan Dunn, *Jefferson's Second Revolution: the election crisis of 1800 and the triumph of Republicanism* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2004), 46.

³⁶ John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon, *Cato's Letters or Essays on Liberty, Civil and Religious, and Other Important Subjects*, 1720-23. 25 June 2005. <http://www.constitution.org/cl/cato_000.htm>.

³⁷ Lance Banning, *The Jeffersonian Persuasion*, 65-68.

of Jefferson's political thought. In two works, *Remarks on the History of England* (1730-31) and *A Dissertation on Parties* (1733-34), Bolingbroke condemned court influence on the Commons, high taxes, and standing armies. He noted that Henry VII's attempts to subvert liberty by destroying the nobility failed, largely because the Commons gained control of the land lost by the nobles, and thus transferred real power there. The court then began to systematically influence the Commons through patronage, bribery, and by infiltrating army officers and pensioners into the Parliament. Since these latter two classes were dependent upon the crown, they could not vote independently; they were the very definition of corruption.³⁸

As historian Bernard Bailyn observed: "The transmission from England to America of the literature of political opposition that furnished the substance of the ideology of the Revolution had been so swift in the early years of the eighteenth century as to seem almost instantaneous; and...these ideas acquired in the colonies an importance, a relevance in politics, they did not then have—and never would have—in England itself."³⁹ For the men who led the American Revolution, the turbulence of England's experience yielded a shared vocabulary of opposition to established authority.

Documenting Tyranny

³⁸ Henry St. John Bolingbroke, *Dissertation Upon Parties*, 1733-34. 16 June 2005. <<http://socserv2.socsci.mcmaster.ca/~econ/ugcm/3ll3/bolingbroke/parties.html>>.

³⁹ Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press, 1967), xi.

Thus, well before Jefferson officially entered the world of politics with his election to the Virginia House of Burgesses in 1768, he had assimilated the English classics on political theory and was intellectually disposed to engage the crises that would soon descend on America. As he assumed his seat, the Virginia Burgesses were expressing their vehement opposition to the Townshend Acts—a perspective that impelled the governor, Norborne Berkeley, baron de Botetourt (1768-1770), to dismiss the body. When the popular William Pitt, earl of Chatham (1757-61; 1766-68)—a champion of the rights of the colonies—became ill, Charles Townshend, Chancellor of the Exchequer, convinced Parliament to pass new taxes on the Americans’ importation of lead, paint, paper, glass, and tea. The legislation also suspended New York’s legislature until they agreed to collect taxes to support British troops in accordance with the Quartering Act (1765). Surrounded by like-minded Virginia gentry and grounded in opposition ideology, Jefferson saw these acts as encroachments on English liberties. His signature was soon affixed to a declaration of non-importation in defiance of both the governor and Parliament.⁴⁰

In March, 1773, Jefferson returned to the House of Burgesses, by this time an accomplished legislator and a newly married husband and father. He was drawn into a circle of young firebrands intent on opposing the tyranny they saw inflicted on the colonies. Together they began the system known as “committees of correspondence”, through which they could coordinate the growing revolutionary impulses throughout America. In the aftermath of the Boston Tea Party (1773) and Parliament’s subsequent imposition of the Coercive

⁴⁰ Cunningham, *In Pursuit of Reason*, 15.

Acts (June, 1774), which included the closing of Boston port, Jefferson prepared *A Summary View of the Rights of British America*—a document proclaiming the British colonies' exclusive right to legislate for themselves. Although premature in its radical ideas, the document made Jefferson famous as a patriot and champion of American rights.⁴¹

Jefferson boldly asserted that the British citizens who emigrated to America were legally of the same status as the Saxons who emigrated to England and took possession of the island. Once there, the Saxons made their own laws without interference from their former mother-country. In a similar way, Jefferson argued, British colonists in America had the sole right to govern themselves. He went on to assert that British Americans had carved out and secured their country with no help from England, except in the latest conflict, the French and Indian War. Jefferson mirrored the attitude of many American colonists when he explained that although England helped defeat the French, it was for the mother country's own benefit as well. (The English position was that the colonists' contributions to the war effort were minimal.) The dispute over this point remained a major cause of the crises leading to the American Revolution.⁴² The British government maintained that the colonies had to help pay for the protection that regular soldiers provided, while the Americans persisted in their belief that England should be grateful for the help the colonial militias gave to the

⁴¹ Thomas Jefferson, *A Summary View of the Rights of British America*. 18 June 2005. <<http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/jeffsumm.htm>>

⁴² Douglas E. Leach, *Roots of Conflict: British Armed Forces and Colonial Americans, 1677-1763* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), 163-66.

mother country's war against France. The failure to come to agreement on this issue was a significant factor leading to the break in 1776.⁴³

A Summary View reads like a preliminary draft for the *Declaration of Independence* that Jefferson penned two years later. Both documents detail colonial grievances against the Crown and Parliament, and among the points of contention is the quartering of soldiers in British America. The Boston Massacre (1770) and the use of British regulars against tenant farmers in New York had outraged Americans. Jefferson insisted that any troops sent must be subject to the local laws of the lands they visit and not be instruments of arbitrary rule from afar. Clearly, the young Virginian aristocrat equated military force with the suppression of liberty—a view that, years later, shaped the policies of his own administration.⁴⁴

The spring and early summer of 1775 found Jefferson again at work, drafting a response to the proposed legislation of Lord North's government, in which the British offered to forego any extra taxation of any colony that itself levied taxes for defense and in support of the government. Although drafted to demonstrate a spirit of compromise, the proposal was still coercive and still insisted on taxation in support of the crown. Jefferson's response was less dramatic than *A Summary View*, but he rejected North's proposal and reiterated that Parliament had no authority over the colonies. He also stated Virginia's strong opposition to the maintenance of a standing army in America—an army

⁴³ Fred Anderson, *Crucible of War: the French and Indian War and the fate of empire in British North America* (New York: Vintage, 2001), 557-587.

⁴⁴ Jefferson, *A Summary View*.

whose nominal purpose was to protect the colonies, but which could also be a handy instrument with which to suppress liberty and coerce free citizens.⁴⁵

In June, 1775, Jefferson arrived at Philadelphia to attend the Continental Congress. His reputation as a gifted writer landed him on the committee whose task was to draw up a declaration that would be published as George Washington assumed command of the Continental Army. The “Declaration of the Causes and Necessity of Taking Up Arms” was a hybrid of several authors, but Jefferson and John Dickinson were the primary writers. The document began by decrying Parliament’s unbounded lust for power and reiterates that attempts to extend its authority over the colonies were completely unjustifiable. It praised the policies and attitude of William Pitt (though not naming him directly) “...the minister, who so wisely and successfully directed the measures of Great Britain in the late war...”, and it quoted Pitt’s belief that the colonies had shown themselves indispensable to the decisive victory over France. The authors then deprecated the post-war decisions of the King and Parliament in trying to recover their depleted finances at the expense of the colonies. As in *A Summary View*, Jefferson and his colleagues point to Britain’s use of military coercion.

“Administration sensible that we should regard these oppressive measures as freemen ought to do, sent over fleets and armies to enforce them.”

“Soon after, the commercial intercourse of whole colonies...was cut off by an act of parliament...and large reinforcements of ships and troops were immediately sent over to general Gage.”⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Cunningham, *In Pursuit of Reason*, 34-35.

⁴⁶ Thomas Jefferson, et al., “Declaration of the Causes and Necessity of taking up Arms”, 6 July 1775. 18 June 2005. <<http://www.law.ou.edu/hist/arms.html>>.

The Declaration then gave the American perspective on the military confrontation at Lexington and Concord (April, 1775), charging the British soldiers with “murdering” and “butchering” colonial citizens (and conveniently ignoring the violence perpetrated by the colonists themselves). It further charged that General Gage, the ranking British commander in America at the time, with instigating Indian attacks against colonists. Unlike the more famous declaration of the following year, the document offered assurances that separation from the mother country was not yet in view, but rather called for a restoration of relations with due respect for American interests.

Within a year Jefferson’s name would forever be associated with another document that came to an altogether different conclusion. In June, 1776, Jefferson, working alone, drafted what would become the Declaration of Independence. It remains a remarkable work of political thought and a cherished expression of American ideology, and it reiterated Jefferson’s loathing of the standing army and the evil uses to which it was put.

“He has kept among us, in times of peace, Standing Armies without the consent of our legislatures.

“He has affected to render the Military independent of and superior to the Civil power.

“For Quartering large bodies of armed troops among us;

“For protecting them [crown officials], by a mock Trial, from punishment from any murders which they should commit on the inhabitants of these States;

“He has plundered our seas, ravaged our Coasts, burnt our towns, and destroyed the lives of our people.

“He is at this time transporting large Armies of foreign Mercenaries to compleat the works of death, desolation and tyranny, already begun...”⁴⁷

Shortly after finishing his work with the Continental Congress, Jefferson returned to his beloved Virginia, intent on assisting his countrymen in the business of planning and creating a state government. From 1776 through 1779, Jefferson worked as a legislator and headed up the effort to reform Virginia’s laws. Though not all of his recommendations gained acceptance, Jefferson successfully led the way in reforming the criminal code, modernizing property laws, and, in the 1780s, achieving religious freedom.⁴⁸

His years of legislative work in the Virginia Assembly may seem at a glance to have little to do with his later military policy, but this period was in fact formative. While Washington and his army endured the British, the elements, and the ineffectual workings of the Continental Congress, Jefferson was busy exploring the social dimensions of the Revolution. He earnestly desired the eradication of privileged aristocracy and its replacement by an “aristocracy of virtue and talents.” In a letter to his friend John Adams, Jefferson observed:

“There is a natural aristocracy among men. The grounds of this are virtue and talents... There is, also, an artificial aristocracy, founded on wealth and birth, without either virtue or talents...a mischievous ingredient in government, and provision should be made to prevent its ascendancy.”⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Thomas Jefferson, “Declaration of Independence”, 4 July 1776. 18 June 2005. <<http://www.law.indiana.edu/uslawdocs/declaration.html>>. See also Pauline Maier, *American Scripture: Making the Declaration of Independence* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977), 105-22.

⁴⁸ Cunningham, *In Pursuit of Reason*, 52-63.

⁴⁹ Jefferson to Adams, Monticello, 1813, Washington ed., vi, 223.

In Virginia, Jefferson intended to do just that. He led the charge against out-dated laws of entail and primogeniture—customs that perpetuated family wealth and land ownership. He also formulated a comprehensive plan for public education, a system specifically designed to produce well educated, well prepared public servants—men of virtue sifted “from the rubbish” as Jefferson put it.⁵⁰ In these and his many other legislative initiatives, Jefferson sought to bring meaning to the Revolution, achieving not merely a political separation from England, but the inauguration of a whole new enlightened society. His social agenda ran completely counter to the spirit of brotherhood developing among Washington’s wartime officers. One of the reason Jefferson would later object to the formation of the Society of the Cincinnati was that it smacked of artificial aristocracy.

Condolences

In June, 1779, Thomas Jefferson was elected governor of Virginia. Foreseeing the challenges that lay ahead, Jefferson suggested to a friend that in place of congratulations, the governor-elect should be offered condolences. The essential problem for Jefferson’s two year administration was a consistent lack of resources equal to the demands of war. The governor’s powers were limited and dependent upon a cooperative legislature. Although Virginia’s potential

⁵⁰ Cunningham, 59.

resources were considerable, it was a huge state with little infrastructure and a small tax base.⁵¹

Jefferson's unhappy duty was to administer a crucial state during the nadir of the American Revolution. Six months after his election, the British shifted their strategy in the Americas and began to focus on the south. Jefferson knew that this would mean invading armies sooner or later would arrive in Virginia. Until that happened, he busied himself in the administrative duties that the war required. He supervised recruitment, provisioning, and the development of magazines. During his sojourn as governor, no one was happy with his state's performance. Washington and the other generals, the Continental Congress, and the citizens of the state remained dissatisfied and increasingly frustrated at the lack of progress.⁵²

In the winter of 1780-81 the British began a series of forays into Virginia, and Governor Jefferson had to scramble to try to put together a defense built around local militias. His efforts were wholly ineffective, and the traitorous Benedict Arnold, commanding a British army, marched into Richmond and destroyed a foundry there before departing. Only the arrival of regular troops could give the British invaders pause, but by spring of 1781, General Charles Cornwallis (1738-1805), now in command, was ready to make a major effort at knocking Virginia out of the war. On 31 May he sent Lieutenant Colonel Banastre Tarleton (1754-1833) on a long-range raid to Charlottesville in an attempt to capture the Virginia legislature and Governor Jefferson. Forced into a

⁵¹ Dumas Malone, *Jefferson and His Time*, Vol 1 (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1948), 301-313.

⁵² *Ibid*, 314-329.

flight that would sully his reputation thereafter, Jefferson barely escaped capture. Since his term as governor was technically over, he decided not to attempt to return to the legislature and instead sought refuge at a family property in Bedford County. For the rest of his life he would have to defend his actions, but there was really very little anyone could have done in his place. (William Livingston, governor of New Jersey, also fled in 1776 when the British invaded.) Jefferson was eventually exonerated of all charges against him and thanked for his faithful service.⁵³

The following year found Jefferson out of public life and in retirement at Monticello, there to attend to his wife's failing health. When his beloved Martha finally succumbed in September, 1782, Jefferson fell into deep depression and only recovered when at last he was appointed as a minister plenipotentiary to negotiate peace in France. Instead of departing immediately for Europe, he spent time in Philadelphia and Annapolis, serving as a legislator with the Congress of Confederation. He witnessed George Washington's farewell as Commander of the Continental Army, and he remained deeply appreciative of Washington's demonstrated virtue in surrendering so much power voluntarily. But in 1783, an event occurred that nearly trumped Washington's self-restraint and threatened a military coup.⁵⁴

⁵³ Ibid, 330-371.

⁵⁴ Cunningham, *In Pursuit of Reason*, 76-89.

Making a Wise Man Mad: The Newburgh Conspiracy of 1783

Of the various threats to liberty that Thomas Jefferson feared, military repression was the chief. Throughout his political career he warned that a large military establishment was expensive, provocative, and a constant danger to freedom. He and his fellow revolutionaries knew well the chronology of English history that led to the dictatorship of Oliver Cromwell, and they feared a replay of it in America. As the Revolutionary War was drawing to a close, that fear was one step away from becoming reality.

In early 1783, the Continental Army was encamped at Newburgh, New York, with the mission of keeping an eye on British troops who remained in New York City. Peace negotiations were ongoing in Paris, and there had been no serious fighting since the British capitulation at Yorktown in 1781. With little to do, soldiers and officers grew increasingly restive at Congress' failure to provide pay and allowances. Most of the men had not been paid in months, and some were due up to six years' back pay. But that was not the Army's only concern. In an effort to curb mass desertions in 1780, Congress had offered a lifetime pension of one-half pay for the officers and a bounty of eighty dollars to the enlisted men who remained with the Army. Those promises seemed at risk, now that the Articles of Confederation had gone into effect and the British threat removed. Under the new Articles, nine states would have to give assent to any such measure, and it was certain that nothing close to such a majority could be found by 1783.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ John Fiske, *The Critical Period of American History: 1783-1789*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1916, 106.

Under the Articles of Confederation, Congress had no more than the right to *ask* for revenue from the states. The states had the option to refuse payment—an option more frequently used than not. Unable to pay even the war debts incurred by their own state budgets (including in some cases, foreign loans), the state legislatures for the most part turned a deaf ear to the needs of the Congress. Many lawmakers were openly hostile to the notion of granting pensions to officers, both for the political implications and for fear of the drain on revenues. By the summer of 1782, Congress had appropriated a mere \$125,000 to cover a \$6 million requirement, and they could not come close to meeting the military payroll.⁵⁶

In the face of this seemingly irresolvable crisis, an aged and respected colonel of the Pennsylvania line, Lewis Nicola, wrote to George Washington with a singular request: to accept the crown and take over the United States as monarch. Washington's reply was a categorical refusal, couched in a reprimanding tone. In this letter back to Colonel Nicola, Washington's character and sentiments toward the republic are clear. He expressed "astonishment" and "abhorrence" at the proposal. While promising to keep the suggested coup secret for the time being, he urged his officers to "banish these thoughts from your Mind..." He was discouraged at the thought that some word or action on his part had led the officers to think he would accede to the request.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ James T. Flexner, *George Washington in the American Revolution* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1968), 487-89.

⁵⁷ Washington to Colonel Nicola, *Writings of George Washington*, ed. John C. Fitzpatrick (Washington DC, US Government Printing Office, 1931-44), vol. 24, 272-73.

In place of this monarchical scheme, Washington encouraged General Henry Knox to head up a committee that would communicate the situation to Congress and seek resolution of the crisis. In November, 1782, the committee of officers drafted a proposal to Congress in which the pension plan might be replaced with a lump sum payoff for the officers, while the enlisted men would still receive the promised eighty dollars. Although most congressmen eventually agreed that something would have to be done for the Army, the intransigence of the state legislatures prevented decisive action, and no taxation was authorized. There was more talk of disbanding the Army to prevent them from marching on the capital.⁵⁸

A conspiracy of officers at Newburgh decided to take action. With Washington's feelings well known, the discontented officers looked elsewhere for leadership. Both officers and men, feeling they were justified in their contempt for Congress, could not be put off by vague sentiments of republicanism. As General Alexander Macdougall noted, "The army is verging to that state which, we are told, will make a wise man mad." Knox and Alexander Hamilton were sympathetic but too close to Washington to be involved. General Horatio Gates, on the other hand, was only too anxious to accept the remonstrations of the men, especially if there were an opportunity to discredit Washington himself. Second in command at Newburgh, he was ready and willing to sponsor a radical move to correct the situation.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ James Flexner, *George Washington in the American Revolution*, 492.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 494.

The conspirators decided to have a meeting among the malcontents at Newburgh. To that end Gates' officers circulated several letters, urging the Army's officers to be prepared to act to obtain justice and oppose the tyranny of an ineffective and ungrateful Congress. They also invited them to assemble on March 10th in the Public Building at Newburgh. When Washington received news about the proposed meeting, he acted decisively. He sent orders canceling the planned meeting and scheduled a new meeting for the 15th. At the same time he notified Congress what was in the offing and worked through Henry Knox to gain the support of key senior officers. He also duped the conspirators into believing that he himself would not attend. Thus when Gates prepared to chair the meeting on March 15, he was shocked when George Washington suddenly entered the room.⁶⁰

The men quieted as Washington asked for and received permission to address the officers. He made it clear that he had copies of the subversive letters that had been circulated. According to the letters, the Army was to either quit the country and head west if war continued, or refuse to disband and use their arms to coerce Congress once peace was attained. Washington continued by denigrating the anonymous author of the plot and appealed to the audience that not only were the planned actions dishonorable, they were also unfeasible. They would, in the end, make a just remuneration even more difficult to obtain from Congress. He went on praising the Army's record of honorable service and assuring them that he would continue to seek justice on their behalf. He insisted

⁶⁰ Ibid, 495.

that Congress was fully resolved to pay them their just compensation, but that such deliberations took time.⁶¹

Whether the assembled officers were impressed by the speech is unknown. Had Washington simply departed at that point, things may have gone against him. But after his formal remarks, he reached into his cloak and removed a letter. The letter was from Congress, and as he prepared to read it, he begged forgiveness for having to don his spectacles: “Gentlemen, you will permit me to put on my spectacles, for I have not only grown gray but almost blind in the service of my country.”

Here was the decisive moment. The humble remark reminded his officers of their shared past. As he read the letter to them, many in the room began to weep. Washington had won them over. He folded the letter, removed his spectacles, and departed. As soon as he was out of the room, Henry Knox and others loyal to Washington introduced resolutions praising the commander-in-chief, pledging loyalty to the Congress, and deprecating the proposed plot. The assembled officers assented almost to a man. The Newburgh plot was defeated.⁶²

While Gates and his co-conspirators were the losers in this affair, their erstwhile allies in the government were the winners. The Army’s reputation had been saved and the proposed coup aborted, but Congress had been sufficiently frightened by the affair so as to goad the lawmakers into action. They approved measures to pay off the officers and men, although payment was delayed. The

⁶¹ Washington to the Officers of the Army, Newburgh, 15 March 1783, *Writings of George Washington*, vol. 26, 222-27.

Army was largely disbanded through the vehicle of furloughs while the revenues were collected and gradually dispersed.⁶³

On April 11, 1783, however, Congress announced an end to hostilities, despite the lack of a peace treaty. Soldiers demanded immediate release and payment, but Congress did not want to let them go before they achieved a final peace, not to mention they did not have the funds to pay the soldiers off. The reaction in the ranks was explosive, and in mid-June soldiers of the Pennsylvania regiments in the Continental Army marched on the Pennsylvania State House, where Congress was in session. The soldiers explicitly threatened the Congressmen with violence if their demands were not met, but the legislators left the building while the mob railed at them. Jefferson, who was working with Congress in Annapolis at the time, learned of the affair from his close friend and colleague, James Madison.⁶⁴ The lesson was clear: a standing army and an ineffectual Congress together would produce violence against the government sooner or later.⁶⁵

Thomas Jefferson was not directly involved in the events of the Newburgh Conspiracy; it occurred at a time when Jefferson was much distracted and depressed by other happenings. He was rebounding emotionally from his disappointing sojourn as Governor of Virginia and still resentful of the attempt to censure him for his conduct during Tarleton's invasion of the state.⁶⁶ Then, in

⁶² Flexner, *George Washington in the American Revolution*, 507.

⁶³ Edmund C. Burnett, *The Continental Congress* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1941), 551-74.

⁶⁴ Madison to Jefferson, Philadelphia, 17 July, 1783, Julian Boyd, ed., *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, vol. 6 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952), 318-19.

⁶⁵ Allan R. Millet and Peter Maslowski, *For the Common Defense: a military history of the United States of America*. New York: The Free Press, 1984, 85.

⁶⁶ Cunningham, 74-75.

fall, 1782, his wife Martha passed away, and a grief-stricken Jefferson withdrew into solitude and sorrowful reflection. In November he rallied at the news that he had been chosen to serve as a minister plenipotentiary to France, but before he could travel there, the war with Britain had ended, and Jefferson was ensconced with Congress through the following two years. It was a time in Jefferson's life when his flagging reputation and influence disallowed any strong protest at the attempted coup.

But there is perhaps another reason why Jefferson refrained from any direct comments about the crisis. Such behavior by a standing army was at the very heart of Jefferson's fears about the military. But until the Newburgh Conspiracy, those concerns had remained merely theoretical. Now he had witnessed his own country on the brink of a military coup, and the subject was one of great sensitivity. Gates or some other officer might well have stepped into the shoes of Oliver Cromwell, had it not been for the actions of Washington. Jefferson understood well the critical role that Washington had played in the affair, and he deeply appreciated the general's restraint and virtue: "...that the moderation & virtue of a single character has probably prevented this revolution from being closed as most others have been, by a subversion of that liberty it was intended to establish..."⁶⁷ But he was also concerned that the nation could not depend on individual virtue alone to protect it from the threat of a military takeover. He anticipated a day when another man might choose the path of Caesar rather than Cato. Jefferson's appreciation of this very close call may have contributed to his general silence on the subject. The other pragmatic

reason not to make too much of the affair was the role of Horatio Gates, who would later become an ally to Jefferson before the former's death in 1806.⁶⁸

The abortive coup by the army at Newburgh reiterated one of the main concerns Jefferson had about the military. In 1775, he had written that "armies are inconsistent with the freedom [of the colonies] and subversive of their quiet."⁶⁹ Chafing that he had been left out of the writing of the Constitution of 1787 (he was in Paris during the Constitutional Convention), Jefferson told Madison that he would have added more safeguards concerning civilian control of the army.⁷⁰ Later he was thankful that the Federalist army had been disbanded prior to the election crisis of 1801, because he feared the military might have intervened.⁷¹ During his own presidency he concluded that "The spirit of this country is totally adverse to a large military force."⁷² Throughout his life, Jefferson feared what a discontented military establishment might do to threaten liberty.

The Newburgh Conspiracy was an important event, and one of many that guided the hands of the men who in 1787 would draft a new constitution. But it also served to illustrate the desperately thin line between a successful republican experiment and the chaos of a military coup. It was the fear of such incidents

⁶⁷ Jefferson to Washington, Annapolis, 1784, Washington ed., i, 334

⁶⁸ For the cooperative relationship between the two men, see Jefferson to Gates, 1781, Monticello, Washington ed., i, 314, in which Jefferson expresses admiration for Gates despite the fiasco at the Battle of Camden, and Jefferson's *Special Message* on gunboats, February, 1807, Washington ed., viii, 81, in which he notes Gates' support for his naval policy.

⁶⁹ Jefferson, *Reply to Lord North's Proposition*, July, 1775, Ford ed., i, 477.

⁷⁰ Jefferson to Madison, August, 1789, Paris, Washington ed., iii, 101.

⁷¹ Jefferson to Nathaniel Niles, March, 1801, Washington, Washington ed., iv, 377.

⁷² Jefferson to Chandler Price, 1807, Washington, Washington ed., v, 47.

that motivated President Thomas Jefferson to avoid creating a sizable military establishment.

The Society of the Cincinnati

Two months after the abortive Newburgh plot, nearby at the headquarters of General Friedrich von Steuben at Mount Gulian, officers of the Continental Army founded an organization called The Society of the Cincinnati, named after the Roman patriot and hero, Cincinnatus, who led 5th century Rome to victory, only to humbly return to his farm at the conclusion of his service. The purpose of the organization was "to perpetuate the remembrance of the achievement of national independence, as well as the mutual friendships which had been formed under the pressure of common danger." The Society was to accept members throughout the officer corps of the Continental Army, including those foreign allies who fought during the Revolution. It would seek, among other things, to provide benevolence and aid to war-weary veterans returning home to an uncertain future. There would be a branch of the organization in each state to facilitate ongoing communication among the veteran officers. Henry Knox was the Secretary General of the organization as well as the primary force in its establishment, but he and the other prominent members appealed to George Washington to serve as President of the Society. The first national assembly of the Society of the Cincinnati was to meet in May, 1784.⁷³

Such a movement among veterans would seem innocent enough in our day, but some people had grave concerns about the Society of the Cincinnati in

1783. The three major points of contention were the Society members' intention to wear a commemorative ribbon, hereditary membership only for those whose ancestors fought in the Continental Army, and the establishment of Society chapters abroad (i.e., in France). Thomas Jefferson offered his frank opinion about the organization when George Washington solicited his advice as to whether he should agree to a connection with the Society. The organization was unlikely to accomplish its goals but instead would become a divisive debating society. Moreover, Jefferson explained, it would cultivate an hereditary aristocracy that might insinuate itself into governance. The connection to France suggested the danger of foreign influence in the new republic. Finally, the Society seemed to threaten "...a distinction...between the civil and military..."⁷⁴

Taking these words to heart, Washington purposed to use his influence with the officers to disestablish the more controversial aspects of the Society. He decided to insist upon the removal of hereditary membership and the frequent meetings called for by the Society's constitution. His "Observations on the Institution of the Society of the Cincinnati" sought to significantly restructure the organization in order to make it more palatable and less potentially dangerous to a free society. He directed the members to remove any hint of politics in the charter, and to discontinue the idea of hereditary membership. He further ordered that there be no influence from abroad in the form of subscriptions or gifts. Finally, he pushed for a strict limitation to the number of meetings.⁷⁵

⁷³ Douglas S. Freeman, *Washington* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968), 520-21.

⁷⁴ Jefferson to Washington, April, 1784. Washington edition, i, 333.

⁷⁵ W.W. Abbot, ed., *The Papers of George Washington, Confederation Series*, vol. 1, January - July 1784 (Charlottesville: [University Press of Virginia](http://www.upv.edu)), 329-32.

Washington threatened to withdraw from the Society if the delegates did not accept his proposals. They did so, but the issue continued to fester, because each state chapter had to ratify the revisions, and some disagreed with the President. When matters came to a head, Washington tried to convince the officers to disband the Society. But as the debate continued, a delegation arrived from France, including Pierre Charles L'Enfant, a French volunteer who had attained the rank of major under Washington, and who had brought Society badges and a gift for Washington—an exquisite golden eagle studded with diamonds, presented on behalf of the French navy. L'Enfant reported that such French notables as Admiral Jean Baptiste D'Estaing and Marshal Jean Baptiste Vimeur, Count de Rochambeau enthusiastically established a French chapter of the Society with the approval of the king himself. Further, the French promised to provide generous donations to the Society in America. Washington's hand was thus forced: he could not disband the Society without insulting a key ally. Some of his revisions were adopted, and others were not. The Society survived and continues to this day.⁷⁶

Jefferson's misgivings about the Society and the dangers it represented were no more apparent than in his warning to Washington: "the moderation & virtue of a single character [i.e., Washington] has probably prevented this revolution from being closed as most others have been by a subversion of that liberty it was intended to establish..."⁷⁷ It is clear that Jefferson remained concerned that if men of moderation—himself and Washington—were removed

⁷⁶ Millett and Maslowski, *For the Common Defense*, 84-85.

⁷⁷ Jefferson to Washington, Annapolis, 1784, Washington ed., i, 334.

from the scene, that others of less restraint, banded together in a Society that provided ideological validation for their ambitions, could replace democracy with tyranny. This threat represented the most serious challenge to national security.

Thus by the time Jefferson departed for France in the summer of 1784 he had watched the disturbing development of an American military philosophy—one that resembled sentiments commonly found in the tyrannical regimes of Europe. In both instances—the Newburgh Conspiracy and the matter of the Society of the Cincinnati, Jefferson saw only the character of one man—Washington—stand in the breach between military coercion and civil liberties. For a man of Jefferson’s ideals, a republic could not depend on the continuing good character of a handful of virtuous public servants. Instead, they would have to rely on strict constitutional limits on the military establishment.

Jefferson’s role in France was to help negotiate treaties of commerce and to generally represent American interests in Europe. At this time he shared the sentiments of some of his later enemies (e.g., Hamilton) that the Articles of Confederation left the national government too weak, and he viewed the conclusion of commercial treaties as helping to strengthen the hand of Congress vis a vis the states.⁷⁸ It would only be later, when he saw Hamilton’s financial schemes as leading to corruption that he began to oppose movements toward the consolidation of the central government.

While in France, Jefferson supervised the publication in book form of his *Notes on the State of Virginia*. The book was popular in Europe as a source on

American geography and culture, and Jefferson's reputation as a scholar, scientist, and writer was well established. In 1785, upon the retirement of Benjamin Franklin, Jefferson was appointed minister to France. Thus he would be absent for four crucial years as American leaders replaced the Articles of Confederation with a more effective form of government.⁷⁹

One of the catalysts for change was a popular uprising known as Shays' Rebellion, and as Jefferson viewed the incident from afar, his sentiments concerning the evolution of American government began to visibly shift away from those of his fellow revolutionaries. While his break with what became known as Federalism was not yet apparent, as a result of Shay's Rebellion, Jefferson's views on the proper uses of the military became crystal clear.

An Honorable Rebellion

In 1786 a group of farmers in western Massachusetts rebelled against taxes levied on them by the state government. Massachusetts had previously witnessed uprisings within the cities on the eastern seaboard (principally Boston) when they increased taxes on the urban population. Afraid of repeating those unhappy events, the legislature decided to shift the burden onto farmers in the west, who were less numerous and more dispersed. Many farmers faced imprisonment for debts they could not pay, or the loss of their farms.

Daniel Shays rose to lead the revolt, which was thereafter called by his name, Shays' Rebellion. Shays had served in the Continental Army and had

⁷⁸ Cunningham, 93.

⁷⁹ Ibid, 94.

held office after the war in Pelham, Massachusetts. As the rebellion grew, Shays' small army marched on courthouses in Great Barrington, Springfield, Concord, Worcester, and other towns. The resulting rebellion produced a crisis, because the Confederation Congress proved unable to raise enough troops to confront the rebels. Eventually, Massachusetts volunteers, led by General Benjamin Lincoln, quelled the uprising with minimal bloodshed in 1787. That spring, John Hancock became governor of Massachusetts and worked with the state legislature to pardon most of the rebels, reduce court fees, and provide debt relief. But Shays' Rebellion pointed clearly to the weakness of the national government.

The effects of the uprising (and similar events in other states) on the national government far exceeded the local significance. General Henry Knox, the superintendent for war, deliberately misrepresented the size and purpose of the rebel force to Congress. He claimed that 12,000 to 15,000 well-armed men were trying to seize Massachusetts and force a redistribution of property, and that if they were not stopped, others from adjoining states would soon join them. As this distorted news reached other states, it served to spur their willingness to send delegates to the proposed constitutional convention in Philadelphia designed to fix the flaws of the Confederation.⁸⁰

Alexander Hamilton's reaction to Shays' Rebellion was in line with his ideological predisposition for strengthening the national government above all other considerations. A student of David Hume and Emmerich de Vattel, he rejected the contractual theory of John Locke and instead viewed government as

necessary to secure commerce and agriculture. People obeyed the government not from some vague respect for a social contract, but rather because of the need for order and the fear of coercion. Further, Hamilton saw the protection of liberty not as the main goal of government, but rather as a means toward promoting national economic and political success.⁸¹

Jefferson sympathized with the rebels.

Can history produce an instance of rebellion so honorably conducted? ...God forbid we should ever be twenty years without such a rebellion.⁸²

I am not discouraged by this; for thus I calculate: An insurrection in one of thirteen States in the course of eleven years that they have subsisted, amounts to one in any particular State, in one hundred and forty-three years, say a century and a half. This would not be near as many as have happened in every other government that has ever existed.⁸³

Jefferson did not especially fear uprisings—especially ones outside his own state of Virginia. He calculated that an occasional rebellion would be a healthy indicator of freedom. He pointed out that the people of Massachusetts had lost markets for their goods as a result of the Revolution and the war with Algiers (which began in 1786), so that money was scarce. He believed that state legislature was wrong to lay so heavy a burden on the farmers, and, while deprecating their violent acts, he understood the rebels' concerns. He viewed the disgruntled farmers' actions as a needed check on arbitrary government.

⁸⁰ Forrest McDonald, *Alexander Hamilton: a biography* (New York: WW Norton & Co., 1979), 93.

⁸¹ McDonald, *Alexander Hamilton*, 98.

⁸² Jefferson to W. H. Smith, Paris, 1787, Washington Edition, ii, 318. <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/>

⁸³ Jefferson to David Hartley, Paris, 1787, Washington Edition, ii., 165. <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/>

Hamilton, on the other hand, saw no virtue in rebellion. Following the writings of Sir James Steuart⁸⁴, he believed that the best guarantor against tyranny was wide-scale commercial development, not the violent impulses of the lower classes. The economic success of the republic depended above all on law and order. Rebels were to be suppressed, not praised for their republican virtue.⁸⁵

Jefferson was concerned by the readiness of the Massachusetts state militia to point their muskets at their fellow citizens, and he feared any form of government that over-relied on coercion rather than on political communication.⁸⁶ Moreover, he was aware that champions of the national government were using the affair to push for a stronger coercive instrument to be used against recurrences of societal violence. He was balanced in his understanding of the need for law and order, and he even noted to a friend that Europe viewed the eventual suppression of the rebellion as a fair indicator of the strength of the American system. But he trusted the local militia more than a standing military commanded by a national government. "I am persuaded myself that the good sense of the people will always be found to be the best army."⁸⁷

It would seem from his reaction to developments leading up to the drafting and ratification of the new constitution that Jefferson was invariably opposed to

⁸⁴ Sir James Steuart, *Inquiry into the Principles of Political Economy* (1767); Steuart, like David Hume and Adam Smith, was a product of the Scottish Enlightenment, and he combined a belief in mercantilism with more modern ideas of supply and demand.

⁸⁵ McDonald, 95-96.

⁸⁶ Thomas Jefferson to James Madison, Paris, 1787, Washington ed., ii, 104.

⁸⁷ Thomas Jefferson to Edward Carrington, 1787, Washington ed., ii, 99.

the military establishment, but such was not the case. As he toiled to improve America's economic and political standing in Europe, Jefferson weighed in on the growing problem of piracy from the Barbary States, and he found himself arguing for military intervention.

The Chief of a Gang of Robbers

In June, 1786, Jefferson received a letter from Richard O'Brien, captain of the *Dauphin*, which had been captured and whose crew was held captive by the Dey of Algiers. In the letter, O'Brien explained the two approaches that the United States might take toward the Barbary States and their interdiction of trade. First, the Americans could pay tribute, as most European powers were doing at the time. Secondly, they could fight and try to intimidate the piratical governments into leaving American ships alone. The choice between these two strategic options came down to two issues: cost efficiency and national honor. Captain O'Brien suggested to Jefferson that the British minister to the Dey was in fact advising the potentate on how to extort the maximum amount from the Americans. This allegation resonated with the Anglophobic Virginian, and in Jefferson's mind, the solution was clear: war.⁸⁸

The Barbary powers—Morocco, Algiers, Tripoli, and Tunis—were nominally loyal to the Ottoman Empire, but in reality they were independent potentates. The ruling powers in Algeria at the time of the crisis were Turks—mostly military adventurers—who had migrated to Algeria, about 12,000 in number. They were forbidden to marry Moors and most often stayed single, and

their singular focus was on ruling over the natives for profit.⁸⁹ The Dey of Algiers—who ruled until his death in 1791—was an impulsive, unpredictable ruler who proceeded to alienate most of his Turkish colleagues, with the result that he had to spend enormous sums to keep from being assassinated. He and his successor specialized in extorting money from foreign powers through demands for tribute and ransoming captured crews. It may seem curious that the great European powers did not combine their efforts to suppress this state-sponsored piracy (as Jefferson urged), but most nations accepted the demand for tribute as a more cost-effective way of securing the sea-lanes. Further, since European powers were often at war with each other, they saw the Barbary pirates as a sort of auxiliary force that could prey upon their enemies.

Some Americans, like John Adams, were like-minded. But for the most part, the citizens of the fledgling American republic rankled under the humiliating practice and desired to be free of paying tribute to any power. American ideals, freshly washed in the blood of patriots who fought against unfair British taxation, would in any case be inimical to such blackmail. As Americans generally wanted to avoid the complications of European wars, they had no interest in the pragmatic arguments and martial calculations that explained away Barbary depredations in Europe. In short, the American political outlook ultimately would choose war rather than tribute.⁹⁰

In the late 1780s, approximately 17% of American wheat exports and about 25% of salted fish exports were finding the best markets in Mediterranean

⁸⁸ O'Brien to Jefferson, 8 June 1786, *ND*, Vol. I, 1-6.

⁸⁹ Joel Barlow, US Agent in Algiers, to Secretary of State, 18 Mar 1796, *ND*, Vol. I, 140-42.

ports. Thus about 100 American merchant ships per year were traversing the waters in vicinity of the Barbary powers.⁹¹ American ships were especially vulnerable to interception, because, unlike the ships of France, Naples, Spain, Italy, and others who sailed from ports throughout the Mediterranean, the American ships had to enter through the Straits of Gibraltar. Captured crews were most often transported directly to Algiers, whereupon they were stripped, put into chains, and forced into hard labor as slaves. The common seamen were exposed to the harshest conditions, often sleeping on stone floors without clothes or blankets. The officers and wealthier passengers would normally find housing with sympathetic European notables in Algiers, although they were still considered slaves and forced to work. While many of the enslaved would survive for up to ten years before being liberated, a number of them died from the recurring plague or simply from the rigors of slavery.

In a letter to John Adams in July, 1786, Jefferson proposed that war with Algeria was preferable to peace, and that in the long run, it would be cheaper than paying endless tribute and more in accord with national honor. He estimated that a “fleet of one hundred and fifty guns” would do the job at a cost of four hundred and fifty thousand pounds to construct the ships, plus forty-five thousand pounds per year operating cost. This amount, he claimed, was less than what they would have to pay in tribute.⁹² Adams responded that Jefferson’s estimates were decidedly low, and that the Algerines had a formidable navy and

⁹⁰ Max Boot, *The Savage Wars of Peace* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 10.

⁹¹ “Report of the Secretary of State to the Congress of the United States: Mediterranean Trade”, 30 December 1790, *ND*, Vol. I, 22.

⁹² Jefferson to Adams, 11 July 1786, *ND*, Vol. I, 10-11.

an invulnerable port in which to hide. Although he agreed that the cause was just, Adams believed (correctly) that their new nation would not tolerate the enormous cost of war. He further pointed out that if the United States were to provoke the Dey through limited and ineffectual attacks, it would only make the matter worse. "We ought not to fight them at all, unless we determine to fight them forever."⁹³ For the time being, the United States would not fight at all. But the problem would continue into the Washington administration.

⁹³ Adams to Jefferson, 31 July 1786, *ND*, Vol. I, 12.

Conclusion

Jefferson departed Le Havre for England and eventually for Norfolk on 7 October, 1789. Arriving in Virginia in late November, he learned that Washington had appointed him secretary of state and that the Senate had already confirmed him. It took him until February, 1790 to finally assent to the post, and he reached the temporary capital, New York City, on March 21st to take up his new duties.

By the time Jefferson became part of Washington's first administration, his views on the proper role of the military were firmly established. The coming conflict with secretary of the treasury Alexander Hamilton had not yet materialized, and Jefferson was still acting in concert (for the most part) with the generation of revolutionaries with whom he had led the nation. The threats of violence that accompanied the Confederation Congress' ineffectual handling of soldiers' pay and release from service concerned Jefferson and his allies. But over the next few years, these concerns became fears and took on flesh in the persons of Hamilton and his cronies.

Jefferson's early perspectives on the military establishment emanated more from political theory and his experiences of British depredations than from actual experience at governance. He was opposed to a standing military establishment on three grounds: the threat to liberty, the expense, and the social implications of a military aristocracy. These three ideas were wedded through a rich tradition of British political writing that informed the Democratic Republicans and populated their vocabulary with dark terms: "corruption", "interest",

“coercion”, and “tyranny”. Jefferson led a faction (not yet a party) within the Revolutionary society that was conditioned by education to perceive any aberrations in the nation’s political development as deliberate evil, and their Devil’s primary tool was the military. Once involved in the national government, Jefferson would experience firsthand the threat of an American military establishment and its implications for the future of the republic.

CHAPTER TWO

Hamilton, Jefferson, and the Path to a Republican Military Policy

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When George Washington became the nation's first president in 1789, he chose Thomas Jefferson to be his secretary of state. Jefferson joined a cabinet of fellow Revolution-era luminaries: John Adams, vice president, Alexander Hamilton, secretary of the treasury; Edmund Randolph, attorney general; and Henry Knox, secretary of war. During his sojourn as the administration's chief diplomat and later as John Adams' vice president, Jefferson found himself increasingly at odds with Federalist policies in general and with the political, economic, and military schemes of Hamilton in particular. In defiance of Washington's repeated pleas to avoid factionalism within the administration, Jefferson became the de facto head of what became the Democratic Republican party—a party defined by its opposition to Washington's and Adams' administrations. This period saw the continued development of Jefferson's thinking about military policy, and by the time of his election to the nation's highest office in 1801, the army and navy were at the center of his disagreements with Hamiltonian Federalism.

Jefferson reached the nation's capital, New York, in late March 1790 to take up his duties as secretary of state. In his role as a member of Washington's cabinet, Jefferson developed conflicting feelings about his chief. He deeply respected Washington and appreciated the centrality of his fellow Virginian to the success of the republic. But he became uncomfortable with Washington's style as president. The nation's first chief administrator was trying to find the balance between avoiding any pretension of monarchical ambition on the one hand, and avoiding the government's slide into democratic chaos on the other. As a result Washington assumed a dignified, aristocratic demeanor and labored to reinforce the authority and power of the executive. Jefferson and other anti-Federalists grew concerned that despite the virtue of Washington, the office of president might become a seat of tyranny.⁹⁴

Jefferson's first significant accomplishment as secretary of state had little to do with foreign policy. When Congress deadlocked over Hamilton's plans to fund the national debt and have the federal government assume the states' debts, Jefferson brokered a deal with Madison that resulted in the passage of the assumption bill in July 1790 along with provisions to move the capital temporarily to Philadelphia and ultimately to the Potomac. Although he grew more and more suspicious of Hamilton's motives, Jefferson was instrumental in convincing his anti-Federalist allies to assist in the first steps toward Hamiltonian Federalism.⁹⁵

More conflict ensued with Hamilton over his unauthorized meddling in foreign affairs. According to long British tradition, the first lord of the treasury

⁹⁴ Noble E. Cunningham, Jr., *In Pursuit of Reason: the Life of Thomas Jefferson* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1987), 137.

was the prime minister, and Hamilton saw his role in this light. The secretary of the treasury favored an alliance with Great Britain, because he saw such a friendship as important to the nation's security and prosperity. Jefferson, however, loathed England and foresaw any such alliance as a precursor to the very subjection the United States had fought a war to escape. The battle lines were forming: Hamiltonian Federalists with an affinity for better relations with England; Jeffersonian anti-Federalists (later, Republicans) more admiring of revolutionary France.⁹⁶

In the developing debate over how to deal with England, Jefferson outlined his strategic assessment to President Washington. Louisiana had been a Spanish colony since 1762, and according to the Treaty of Paris (1783) and Britain's corresponding agreements with Spain, France, and the Netherlands, known as the Treaties of Versailles, Spain also received the ill-defined East and West Florida. Since Spain was a weak power, vis a vis France and England, Jefferson was concerned about the future of the American West and South. He pointed out that the greatest danger from abroad would be realized if the British were able to wrest control of the Mississippi River and Louisiana Territory from Spain, because they would then have the United States completely surrounded. A British presence west of the Mississippi would mean incessant English meddling aimed at the destruction of the American republic. Hence, Jefferson concluded, American strategy—both diplomatic and military—must aim at deterring or delaying any British moves toward acquiring Louisiana. A war

⁹⁶ Joseph Ellis, *Founding Brothers* (New York: Vintage Books, 2002), 48-80.

between European powers should see the United States as strictly neutral, Jefferson counseled, unless those powers attempted to seize the other's American holdings, thus disrupting the balance along the frontiers. If London could agree to equitable treaty arrangements that left the status quo alone in America and treated the United States as a diplomatic equal, then the secretary of state would acquiesce in such a treaty. The vast disparity in strength (economic and military) between the two nations, along with England's need to control shipping to and from the European continent, precluded such an ideal outcome. As a result, the controversy between the two embryonic American political parties came to a head over the English connection. The Federalists' (and especially Hamilton's) coziness with the English worried the Virginian Francophile.⁹⁷

The Algerine War

The ongoing conflict with the Dey of Algiers was still festering when Jefferson became secretary of state. His impulses to fight rather than pay tribute were still strong, but the reality of America's naval weakness tempered his policy recommendations.

When three ships—the *Betsey*, *Dauphin* and *Maria*—were captured along with their crews, the Washington administration, through secretary of state Jefferson, sought the release of the captives. Jefferson sent an envoy, Mr. John Lamb, but the mission was hopeless before it got started, because the

⁹⁶ Roger G. Kennedy, *Burr, Hamilton, and Jefferson: a study in character* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 172.

Americans had determined to offer the Dey less than \$300 per man—a pittance compared to the going rate for redeeming Christian slaves. Most nations were redeeming their citizens at a rate of \$1200 to \$4000 per man. The American envoy was snubbed and returned home.⁹⁸ Later remonstrations from Captain Richard O'Brien and others claimed that the ill-advised and arrogant Mr. Lamb had done irreparable damage to the American reputation and chances for peace both in Algeria and Morocco.⁹⁹ Jefferson's responsibility—indeed, culpability—in this affair is inescapable, but it derived from a profound American ignorance concerning the norms and standards of Barbary diplomacy. As the years went by, Jefferson and his colleagues would become more attuned to the issues and more willing to compromise...to a limit.

While some in Congress and in the administration agreed in principle with Jefferson's martial sentiments, several years went by without resolute action. In February, 1792, Congress authorized a sum of \$100,000 to bribe the Barbary powers into peace, and another \$40,000 for the president to redeem the prisoners in Algiers.¹⁰⁰ Unfortunately for the Americans, prices had gone up, both for peace and redemption of slaves. The regency of Algeria was not amenable to cutting a special deal with the Americans, for fear that European powers might get wind of it and vie for reduction of their tribute as well.

⁹⁷ Jefferson to Washington, 12 July, 1790, Boyd edition, XVII, 108-10. See also Charles A. Cerami, *Jefferson's Great Gamble: the remarkable story of Jefferson, Napoleon and the men behind the Louisiana Purchase* (Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks, Inc., 2003), 8.

⁹⁸ "Report of the Secretary of State", presented to Congress 30 December, 1790, *ND*, Vol. I, 18-19.

⁹⁹ Richard O'Brien to Thomas Jefferson, 8 Jun 1786, *ND*, Vol. I, 2; and James Simpson to Secretary of State, 25 Jul 1795, *ND*, Vol. I, 105.

¹⁰⁰ "Senate of the United States Resolution to Ransom Prisoners at Algiers", 22 Feb 1792, *ND*, Vol. I, 34-35.

In spring, 1792, Washington tried another approach. As Captain O'Brien had suggested that paying an annual tribute was historically more effective than paying a large lump sum for a treaty of peace, the president commissioned John Paul Jones to make his way to Algiers as the American Consul there and offer up to \$25,000 annually plus another \$27,000 for the immediate release of the thirteen remaining American captives (one of whom was actually a Frenchman who had been a passenger on one of the captured ships).¹⁰¹ Admiral Jones died in Paris before receiving his commission, so Jefferson directed Thomas Barclay, US Consul in Morocco, to take over the mission, but he also died before he could negotiate the deal. As the Americans scrambled to secure a deal, the Algerines captured another prize—an American schooner, the *Lark*. Fortunately, her crew escaped capture, for which the diplomats were profoundly grateful. If they had been captured, the special envoy sent to secure peace and release of all hostages would have had insufficient funds to obtain their freedom.¹⁰²

Another blow to the American desire for peace came in October, 1793 when Algeria and Portugal concluded a twelve-month truce. With free access to the Straits of Gibraltar, the Algerine ships would go after American shipping with a vengeance.¹⁰³ Edward Church, US Consul in Lisbon, reported to Jefferson that the truce was a British concoction—negotiated by them on behalf of the Portuguese—for the nefarious purpose of turning the Algerines loose on the

¹⁰¹ Jefferson to John Paul Jones, 1 June 1792, *ND*, Vol. I, 36-41.

¹⁰² James Simpson, US Consul in Gibraltar, to Thomas Jefferson, 1 June 1793, *ND*, Vol. I, 44.

¹⁰³ David Humphreys, US Minister to Lisbon, to Michael Morphy, US Consul in Malaga, Spain, 6 Oct 1793, *ND*, Vol. I, 46.

Americans.¹⁰⁴ To add to this injury, the British were impressing American sailors from ships that put into Cadiz or Lisbon.

Throughout the conflict with the Barbary powers, Jefferson was also convinced that the European nations, acting in concert with America, could easily suppress the piracy to the mutual benefit of all. He was relentless in pursuing and recommending such a course of action but without much success. While no formal confederation was achieved, the United States' shipping did benefit from the actions of the Portuguese navy until it was temporarily withdrawn pursuant to the truce in 1793. But in general the Europeans were unwilling to take on the expense of such operations, and they viewed Barbary depredations upon others with apathy or even delight. And as Nathaniel Cutting observed from Lisbon, the various Christian powers were unwilling to take action that might benefit other powers.¹⁰⁵

By the end of October 1793, the Algerines had captured eleven more American merchantmen along with their crews, bringing the number of American slaves in Algiers to something more than 110.¹⁰⁶ The Dey of Algiers was reportedly demanding a ransom of \$3,000,000 to settle the matter.¹⁰⁷ This and the regent's refusal to negotiate with Colonel David Humphreys—the latest choice for special envoy to Algiers—convinced George Washington, his cabinet, and Congress that their only recourse was to build a navy and fight. Even the captive Captain O'Brien advised against bribery and tribute, because he

¹⁰⁴ Church to Jefferson, 12 Oct 1793, *ND*, Vol. I, 47-49.

¹⁰⁵ Nathaniel Cutting to Thomas Jefferson, 10 Feb 1794, *ND*, Vol. I, 66.

¹⁰⁶ James Simpson to Thomas Jefferson, 25 Nov 1793, *ND*, Vol. I, 55.

¹⁰⁷ James Simpson to Thomas Jefferson, 3 Jan 1794, *ND*, Vol. I, 60.

conjectured that any negotiated peace was almost certainly to be repudiated upon the death of each Barbary ruler. As soon as a new ruler arose, O'Brien stated, both his own avarice and the prompting of European powers (i.e., Britain) hostile to the United States would convince the new dey to demand more tribute. Nathaniel Cutting, an American official in Lisbon, wrote a lengthy letter to Jefferson decrying the hopelessness of obtaining peace with Algiers—

In my opinion it would be more to the honor and advantage of any nation which is determined to keep up a naval establishment, to expend ten times the sum in supporting a Squadron of Ships of War in the Mediterranean sufficient to protect its Commerce, than tamely to comply with the insolent demands with the chief of a gang of Robbers is pleased to make...

How small a proportion of the immense amount that has been received by the States of Barbary as the price of peace with this last half Century, would support a naval armament sufficient to annihilate their Marine! This, I am aware, would not be so easy an achievement as many imagine; --but still I think it within the line of possibility if proper methods are pursued. It is not *great force* that is so necessary to effect this desirable purpose, as *great vigilance, activity, patience & perseverance*. [sic]¹⁰⁸

The Americans also tried secretly to work through the French religious order, the Mathurins, which had been founded in 1198 for the purpose of redeeming Christian slaves taken by the Barbary powers. Although the French were willing and able to assist, the price of redemption was climbing dramatically, and the Mathurins were reluctant to act until the requisite monies were deposited in Paris. As the French Revolution unfolded, the assets of the Mathurins, like those of other religious orders, were seized and made public—a severe blow to the ability of the order to negotiate redemptions. By the time the penurious

¹⁰⁸ Nathaniel Cutting to Thomas Jefferson, 10 Feb 1794, *ND*, Vol. I, 66-67.

American Congress appropriated the money, the price for redemption was well beyond the available money, and negotiations through the Mathurins ceased.¹⁰⁹

Thus Jefferson was again convinced that military means were the best hope for procuring the release of the American captives. He proposed that the United States send a force to patrol the endangered area from April through November each year, when the Barbary pirates were active. He even suggested to Congress that if American naval forces could prey upon Algerine or Turkish ships and capture their crews, that the Dey might be amenable to a prisoner exchange, although Jefferson admitted that such an arrangement would be extraordinary, based upon past experiences. In any case the Algerine navy was not that strong, and their ships never acted in concert, but rather preyed upon other vessels in single-ship actions. Their gunnery was mediocre at best, and they relied upon boarding to make their captures. Finally, Jefferson reported, their ships are not well constructed and unable to withstand a broadside from an American frigate.¹¹⁰

Still, it takes a navy to fight a naval war, and the United States had none since the last ship of the Revolutionary War was sold in 1785—coincidentally the same year that Algiers began preying on American merchantmen.¹¹¹ With virtually no one still clinging to the hope that peace could be bought from the Dey of Algiers, Washington prevailed upon Congress to build a navy, and in March,

¹⁰⁹ Gardner W. Allen, *Our Navy and the Barbary Corsairs* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1965), 42.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 43.

¹¹¹ Bauer, K. Jack, "Naval Shipbuilding Programs, 1794-1860", *Military Affairs*, Vol. 29, Issue 1 (Spring, 1965), 29-40.

1794, Congress authorized four 44-gun and two 36-gun vessels.¹¹² The act allowed the president to either construct or purchase the vessels, and it also specified the size, pay, and rations of the crews—including a detailed daily menu for each day of the week. Washington’s administration opted to construct the vessels, one each in Boston (*Constitution*, 44 guns), New York (*President*, 44 guns), Philadelphia (*United States*, 44 guns), Baltimore (*Constellation*, 36 guns), Portsmouth, New Hampshire (*Congress*, 36 guns), and Norfolk (*Chesapeake*, 44 guns).¹¹³ The ships were to be completed and afloat in 1795.¹¹⁴

The political wrangling over the bill was intense, as many felt that any military establishment was expensive, provocative to foreign powers, and a threat to liberty. In the end, the bill was passed with a proviso that the construction would be cancelled in the event a negotiated peace occurred. Although construction began the ships were not completed before peace between the two powers was concluded in March, 1796. Only three of the ships were authorized for completion—the *United States*, *Constitution*, and *Constellation*.¹¹⁵

Meanwhile, Jefferson and his successors at the State Department, Edmund Randolph (2 Jan 1794 through 20 Aug 1795) and Timothy Pickering (10 Dec 1795 through 12 May 1800) continued to work through David Humphreys to effect peace and redemption of prisoners with Algiers. The liberal sum of \$800,000 was to be Humphreys’ upward limit in his efforts with the Dey. Actual

¹¹² “Act pertaining to the Navy”, 27 Mar 1794, *ND*, Vol. I, 69-70.

¹¹³ Secretary of War to Secretary of the Treasury, 21 Apr 1794, *ND*, Vol. I, 71. The location proposed for the *Chesapeake* was variously given as Norfolk, Portsmouth, Virginia, or Charleston.

¹¹⁴ “Report of the Secretary of War concerning Construction of Frigates under the Act of 27 March 1794, communicated to the House of Representatives, 29 Dec 1794”, *ND*, Vol. I, 90-92.

ransom was to be obtained at the lowest possible price, not exceeding \$3000 per man. In the eight years since the *Dauphin* and *Maria* were captured, Jefferson and the rest of the administration had come to realize that dealing with the Barbary states was not cheap.¹¹⁶ Still, this sum was far short of the millions demanded by the Dey. But throughout 1795 American officials instructed Humphreys and the other agents to the Barbary powers to try to effect peace and, where necessary, release of American slaves. In August, James Simpson reported to Secretary Randolph that he had achieved a peace treaty with “his Imperial Majesty Muley Soliman”, the regent of Morocco, on similar terms as those agreed with the ruler’s late father.¹¹⁷

In September, 1795, the US envoy to Algiers, Joseph Donaldson, concluded a treaty of peace with the government of the Dey. Some of the American captives were freed (the rest to be arranged later), and the American Senate ratified the treaty on 7 March, 1796.¹¹⁸ Official documents listed a paltry \$38,188.40 as the price for this treaty, but letters from David Humphreys state that the deciding factor in winning peace from the Dey was French influence.¹¹⁹ In addition the Turkish version of the treaty states that an annual tribute of 12,000 Algerian gold pieces (or the equivalent value in naval stores) would be paid to Algeria. A letter from Captain O’Brien in 1796 refers to \$60,000 in presents to

¹¹⁵ “Act pertaining to the Navy”, United States Statutes at Large, Fourth Congress, Session I, *ND*, Vol. I, 150.

¹¹⁶ Jefferson to Humphreys, 25 Aug 1794, *ND*, Vol. I, 80-81.

¹¹⁷ James Simpson to Secretary of State, 18 Aug 1795, *ND*, Vol. I, 106.

¹¹⁸ Algiers—Treaty, 5 Sep 1795 (with notes on the translations from both the Arabic and Turkish versions), *ND*, Vol. I, 107-116.

¹¹⁹ David Humphreys to Joel Barlow, US Agent in Algiers, 7 Sep 1795, *ND*, Vol. I, 117-18.

the Dey.¹²⁰ In a secret letter from David Humphreys to the US Charge d'Affaires in Madrid, the amount of \$400,000 in Spanish silver or hard dollars is requested for export to Algiers for the redemption of Americans there, and other correspondence confirms that the United States gave the Dey an armed frigate as well.¹²¹ In any case the treaty did not represent a complete resolution of the Barbary problem, because the Dey constantly threatened to renew assaults if his demands were not met, and both Tripoli and Tunis remained in some state of hostility with the United States.¹²² Further, when civil war broke out in Morocco, the pretender to the throne began to prey upon any shipping he suspected of transporting goods that would aid his enemy.¹²³

In April, 1796, Joel Barlow wrote extensively to Secretary of State Timothy Pickering explaining why concluding peace with Algiers, even at the expense of over a million dollars, was well worth the cost. He showed that the cost of losing ships, redeeming crews, and rising insurance rates would soon make the Mediterranean trade next to impossible. Peace, on the other hand, would facilitate a most lucrative trade, which would stimulate American economy and more than compensate the public monies through taxes and duties.¹²⁴ It was this line of reasoning, along with an innate fear of a standing military establishment, that convinced the administration and the Congress to conclude peace with the Dey. In vindication of Barlow's advice, the Dey of Algiers fought a war against

¹²⁰ Richard O'Brien to Secretary of State, 5 Feb 1796, *ND*, Vol. I, 132.

¹²¹ David Humphreys to US Charge d'Affaires, Madrid, 29 Feb 1796, *ND*, Vol. I, 138; and David Humphreys to Dey of Algiers, 3 Aug 1796, *ND*, Vol. I, 169-70.

¹²² Joel Barlow and Joseph Donaldson to David Humphreys, 3 Apr 1796, *ND*, Vol. I, 143.

¹²³ David Humphreys to Secretary of State, 18 Jul 1796, *ND*, Vol. I, 167-68.

¹²⁴ Joel Barlow to Secretary of State, 20 Apr 1796, *ND*, Vol. I, 148-50.

Tunis when the ruler there refused to deal peaceably with the Americans.¹²⁵

Jefferson, who officially resigned as secretary of state on 31 December 1794 soon to re-entered politics as vice president to John Adams in 1796 and, even more importantly, as the de facto head of the emerging Republican Party. The Barbary States continued to be a thorn to the Americans throughout the period, and matters would come to a head during Jefferson's presidency. Through the conflict with the Dey of Algiers, Jefferson had learned that the tribute system was well established and, from a dispassionate, economic standpoint, well-reasoned. Ultimately, however, his own feelings of justice and nationalism, and the advice he received from realists like Nathaniel Cutting, caused Jefferson to view the tribute system as an offending anachronism of the Old World monarchical system. When faced with depredations at the hands of the Pasha of Tripoli, President Jefferson would opt for war.

Alexander Hamilton and the Development of Federalist Military Policy

Much of what constitutes the political legacy of Thomas Jefferson must be attributed to his sustained reaction to Hamiltonian Federalism. According to Edward Mead Earle (and many other historians), during the years 1789-1797, Alexander Hamilton did more than any other individual to establish the early national policies of the United States.¹²⁶ He sought to strengthen the national

¹²⁵ David Humphreys to Secretary of State, 31 Jan 1797, *ND*, Vol. I, 194.

¹²⁶ Earle, Edward Mead, "Adam Smith, Alexander Hamilton, Friedrich List: The Economic Foundations of Military Power", *Makers of Modern Strategy: military thought from Machiavelli to Hitler*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1943, 129.

government at the expense of states, and he believed that in order to develop a strong nation, he must revive public credit. To achieve this latter goal, he had to have both the financial and political backing of speculators, and this in turn argued for a Congress comprised of men with interests in the public debt. From Thomas Jefferson's viewpoint, this arrangement was the very definition of corruption and had to be opposed.¹²⁷ Since a primary source of public expense was the military establishment, it was inevitable that Jefferson would oppose any accretions to army or navy strength, and his opposition in fact came to characterize Democratic Republicanism. Jefferson's perceived opposition to a large standing military thus emanated from an optimistic pacifism, from a desire to restrict debt and the political corruption that would attend that debt, from an aversion to the establishment of a military aristocracy that would threaten Jefferson's egalitarian social goals, and from fear that the military establishment would be a threat to liberty. Because President Jefferson's military policies were in large measure a reaction to Hamilton's policies during the administrations of Washington and Adams, he had much to undo before he could formulate a rational military policy.

The disaffection that existed between Jefferson and Hamilton began with their service together in Washington's administration. As secretary of state Jefferson served alongside Hamilton, the secretary of the treasury. They began as friends, but the relationship deteriorated over ever-widening political views. At

¹²⁷ "I have been among those who have feared the design to introduce the corruptions of the English government here, and it has been a strong reason with me for wishing there was an ocean of fire between that island and us." Jefferson to Adams, 1796, Ford ed., vii, 57.

a dinner at Jefferson's house in April, 1791—John Adams and Alexander Hamilton attending—the conversation drifted to the British constitution.

Adams: "Purge that constitution of its corruption, and give to its popular branch equality of representation, and it would be the most perfect constitution ever devised by the wit of man."

Hamilton: "Purge it of its corruption, and give to its popular branch equality of representation, and it would become an *impracticable* government: as it stands at present, with all its supposed defects, it is the most perfect government which ever existed."¹²⁸

Hamilton, despite his vigorous arguments in favor of the new American Constitution, had originally called for a government in which the president and senators were elected for life. He wanted the president to be empowered to appoint state governors, and to be invested with the right to veto state legislation—even if passed unanimously. With the expression of such sentiments, Jefferson could not but interpret Hamilton as the enemy of liberty. Jefferson also had grave concerns over Hamilton's financial schemes, because he viewed public debt, pensioners, and stockjobbers through the lens of James Harrington and Algernon Sidney, who believed that only an independent man (e.g., a landowner) could be free of corruption. By populating Congress with men who had an interest in the public debt—either as pensioners or creditors—Hamilton (and, by extension, Federalists) were gaining undue influence over the political system. Thus were planted the seeds of the nation's two-party system. The resulting vicious newspaper war that ran its course in the early 1790s dismayed Washington but became a necessary dialogue between two diverging views on the proper course for the republic.

The question of whether the nation required a standing army led to a fundamental disagreement between the Federalists and the Republicans. Taking his cue from Whig philosophy, Jefferson claimed that standing armies were an unnecessary expense and “dangerous to the rights of the nation”.¹²⁹ He even dipped into ancient history, despite his later deprecation of classical (as opposed to scientific) education:

"The Greeks and Romans had no standing armies, yet they defended themselves. The Greeks by their laws, and the Romans by the spirit of their people, took care to put into the hands of their rulers no such engine of oppression as a standing army. Their system was to make every man a soldier and oblige him to repair to the standard of his country whenever that was reared. This made them invincible; and the same remedy will make us so."¹³⁰

It is easy to over-emphasize this difference in opinion. As was often the case in the political conflicts of the early republic, both parties wanted a viable national security establishment, and both understood the need for some sort of standing army. The difference between Hamiltonian Federalists and Jeffersonian Republicans was a matter of nuance and degree. Despite his oft-repeated rhetoric and his ideological background, Jefferson came to recognize that no modern nation could depend solely on the militia.¹³¹ But it was Alexander Hamilton’s deliberate politicization of the regular army (by reserving commissions for loyal Federalists and restricting the opportunities of Republicans) that, in

¹²⁸ Francis W. Hirst, *Life and Letters of Thomas Jefferson*. NY: The MacMillan Company, 1926, 269-70.

¹²⁹ Jefferson to David Humphreys, 1789, ME 7:323.

¹³⁰ Jefferson to Thomas Cooper, 1814, ME 14:184.

¹³¹ Theodore J. Crackel, *Mr. Jefferson’s Army: political and social reform of the military establishment, 1801-1804* (New York: New York University, 1987), 2-9.

Jefferson's mind, endangered the nation and in turn shaped Jefferson's handling of military affairs.¹³²

Hamilton had been born on the West Indian island of Nevis and was orphaned by the time he was eleven. He made his way to New York and entered King's College in 1773. He shortly thereafter became a writer of much prominence in the pamphlet wars that preceded the Revolution. In 1776, he entered the Continental Army and fought with Washington at Long Island, White Plains, Trenton, and Princeton. He became Washington's secretary and later commanded a regiment under Lafayette with distinction. At Yorktown, he commanded a column in the final assault on the British fortifications. After the war, he worked with Washington to bring about a strong military establishment for the new Confederation. Hamilton married well by winning the hand of Elizabeth Schuyler, the daughter of General Philip Schuyler, and thus allied himself with one of the most prominent families in New York. In April, 1783, Hamilton chaired a Congressional committee whose task was to formulate a post-war military policy. He solicited advice from Washington, and Washington responded with his "Sentiments on a Peace Establishment."

Washington believed that the country required a regular army to garrison West Point as well as critical points in the north, west, and south to "awe the Indians" and protect against any attacks from Canada or Florida. He wrote that an army of 2,631 officers and men would suffice. Washington anticipated reaction to what was considered a high number, but he noted that it would be

¹³² Crackel, *Mr. Jefferson's Army*, 19.

better to start with a large army that would impress the Indians and then decrease slowly, than to suffer an embarrassment and later be required to build up. (His unintentional prophecy came true seven years later with Josiah Harmar's defeat at the hands of Little Turtle in 1790, and a year after that with the Miami Indians' decisive defeat of General Arthur St. Clair's army.) He also believed in the development and organization of a militia that would be nationalized when required, as well as supervised by an Inspector General. He called for the establishment of arsenals and manufactories to store and build arms and munitions. Finally, he believed that one or more military academies should be established to educate young officer cadets in military science—especially engineering and artillery. In passing, Washington endorsed the need for a sea-going navy to protect American commerce and coastlines.¹³³

Hamilton's subsequent report to Congress followed Washington's recommendations generally, but he emphasized the role of regulars and less that of militia. He began his report by urging the Congress to clarify their powers to organize the military, since the Articles of Confederation were vague on the subject. He then argued the case for a nationally organized military establishment, rather than trying to depend upon the several states, each developing its own militia. He concluded his report by recommending a standing army of four regiments of infantry and one of artillery, along with a corps of

¹³³ Washington, George, "Sentiments on a Peace Establishment, 2 May 1783", as quoted in Robert K. Wright, Jr. and Morris J. MacGregor, Jr., "Soldier-Statesmen of the Constitution". Washington DC: US Army Center of Military History, 1987. 17 July 2005, <<http://www.army.mil/cmh-pg/books/RevWar/ss/peacedoc.htm>>

engineers.¹³⁴

Hamilton, however, was arguing in favor of a national military establishment at a time when the Congress was ardently anti-nationalist and anti-military. His report and recommendations were rejected, and on June 2, 1784, the Congress disbanded most of the army, leaving only 80 men and a few officers.¹³⁵ But with military threats growing in the West, the Congress realized that this tiny force could do nothing to defend against the Indians or the British, and could not even restrict white squatters settling illegally in Indian lands. The day after disbanding the Continental Army, they therefore authorized the organization of the 1st American Regiment—a 700 man outfit to be provided by four states and organized as a compromise between militia and regulars. In 1785, they authorized the regiment to be filled with soldiers enlisting for three years. Under the command of Josiah Harmar, this single regiment had little chance to “awe the Indians” or command respect from the British. It remained a woefully inadequate force.¹³⁶

The experience of Daniel Shays’ Rebellion in 1786 made it clear both that the single regiment army was insufficient for the nation’s security needs and that the Confederation Congress was dysfunctional, as indeed were the Articles of Confederation themselves. The result was the Constitutional Convention of 1787, which produced a mixed and balanced form of government. The

¹³⁴ Alexander Hamilton, “Report of a Committee to the Continental Congress on a Military Peace Establishment, 18 June 1783”, as quoted in Robert K. Wright, Jr. and Morris J. MacGregor, Jr., “Soldier-Statesmen of the Constitution”. Washington DC: US Army Center of Military History, 1987. 17 July 2005, <<http://www.army.mil/cmh-pg/books/RevWar/ss/peacedoc.htm>.>

¹³⁵ Millett & Maslowski, *For the Common Defense*, 86.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 87.

Constitution split control of the military between the Executive, who would command the military, and the Congress, who would authorize, organize, and equip the military. The new Constitution also established the dual tradition of a regular army and state militias.

Hamilton, of course, was instrumental in achieving the ratification of the Constitution, arguing strongly in favor of the nationalist idea in the *Federalist*. In Number 24, he addressed the military question directly and noted that those who opposed the new Constitution because of fears of a standing army were misinformed. First, neither the Articles of Confederation nor most of the state constitutions prevented the establishment of standing armies. Second, and more to the point, Hamilton argued that the new republic required a standing army, due to the threats to the north, south, and west. Militias, he claimed, would not be capable of sustained frontier duty.¹³⁷

In Number 25, Hamilton went on to argue that the states were not competent to handle military exigencies, because the threats to security span “from Maine to Georgia”. He pointed to the prohibition in the Articles of Confederation against states maintaining non-militia armies of their own and endorsed the sentiment that a military run by the several states would be uneconomical, disorganized, and ineffective. Instead, a national force, consisting of regulars, not militia, must be the bedrock of American security.

Here I expect we shall be told that the militia of the country is its natural bulwark, and would be at all times equal to the national defense. This doctrine, in substance, had like to have lost us our independence. It cost millions to the United States that might have

¹³⁷ Alexander Hamilton, the *Federalist No. 24*. 13 July 2005, <http://memory.loc.gov/const/fed/fedpapers.html>.

been saved. The facts which, from our own experience, forbid a reliance of this kind, are too recent to permit us to be the dupes of such a suggestion. The steady operations of war against a regular and disciplined army can only be successfully conducted by a force of the same kind. Considerations of economy, not less than of stability and vigor, confirm this position. The American militia, in the course of the late war, have, by their valor on numerous occasions, erected eternal monuments to their fame; but the bravest of them feel and know that the liberty of their country could not have been established by their efforts alone, however great and valuable they were. War, like most other things, is a science to be acquired and perfected by diligence, by perseverance, by time, and by practice.¹³⁸

Hamilton believed that recent history had shown that even in peace, the states had on occasion kept standing armies as a deterrent to insurrection. The logical conclusion, then, would be that the Constitution should allow the Congress discretion in whether to keep an army, rather than proscribing one altogether. By leaving the power to raise armies in the hands of the legislature, there would be no need to fear executive excess.¹³⁹

Jefferson, to the contrary, feared giving the national government the power to maintain a standing army, especially in times of peace. Indeed, he wrote to Madison concerning the Bill of Rights that he would have preferred the inclusion of another provision: "All troops of the United States shall stand ipso facto disbanded, at the expiration of the term for which their pay and subsistence shall have been last voted by Congress, and all officers and soldiers, not natives of the United States, shall be incapable of serving in their armies by land except during a foreign war."¹⁴⁰

On June 21, 1788, the ninth state ratified the Constitution, and a new form

¹³⁸ Alexander Hamilton, the *Federalist No. 25*. http://memory.loc.gov/const/fed/fed_25.html.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

of government was in place. The stage was set for the creation of a military policy that could transcend the weaknesses of the Articles of Confederation. Just as he had incalculable influence in obtaining ratification of the Constitution, so also Hamilton would be a key figure in developing the military policies of the Washington and Adams administrations.

With Henry Knox as the Secretary of War, Washington's administration urged Congress to nationalize the state militias, giving the central government the power to train, equip, and organize them in a coherent way. Instead, in 1792, Congress responded with two pieces of legislation that fell far short of creating effective militias: the Calling Forth Act, and the Uniform Militia Act. By the former, the president could, in time of war, nationalize the state militias—but not to suppress an insurrection or for any other purpose. The latter act theoretically provided for uniform militia regulations that would have produced the “sameness” and interchangeability that Washington called for, but since the legislation had no coercive power, the states largely ignored it. The main impact of this bad legislation was that it proved the nation would have to rely primarily upon a regular army for security.¹⁴¹

Hamilton believed that the nation's economy was fundamental to its power, and that the economy must be nurtured and controlled to a degree by the state. An economic nationalist, Hamilton wanted to “render the United States independent of foreign nations for military and other essential supplies.”¹⁴²

¹⁴⁰ Jefferson to Madison, Paris, Aug 1789, Ford ed., v, 113.

¹⁴¹ Crackel, *Mr. Jefferson's Arm*, 10.

¹⁴² Hamilton, Alexander, *Works*, Henry Cabot Lodge, ed. New York: 1904, Federal Edition, IV, 70.

Hamilton argued in 1791 that economic independence through diversity of manufactures, selected protection of industries, and some government subsidies, along with agriculture, would lessen the possibility of foreign intrigue and render the nation less likely to be embroiled in foreign wars. This happy state, in turn, would lessen the need for a large military establishment.¹⁴³ Such sentiments against a large military establishment would certainly have resonated with Jefferson. But there is no evidence that Hamilton actually believed his own words. The disagreements between the two men were destined to come to a head during the administration of John Adams.

The Wild, Wild West

A critical analysis of Thomas Jefferson's military policies will necessarily include a discussion of his dealings with the American Indians. Anthony Wallace, in *Jefferson and the Indians: the tragic fate of the first Americans*, represents the most common school of thought on the subject, and he criticizes Jefferson and others for their hypocrisy, cruelty, and culpability in the eventual destruction of Indian society.¹⁴⁴ The salient problem with this analysis is that it is based more on morality and ethics than on historical context. Although aware of the ethical implications of their various policies toward the Indians, policymakers of the early republic thought of the matter more in terms of national security. The reason was simple: the Indians represented a grave threat to the viability, even the survival of the United States. While moral analysis of Jefferson's policies remains

¹⁴³ See Washington's Farewell Address, 1796, drafted by Alexander Hamilton.

attractive for 21st century critics, the morality question is quite beside the point of this study; the Indians were a serious threat.¹⁴⁵ To understand Thomas Jefferson's Indian policy, it is necessary to review how the two previous presidents dealt with the problem.

Washington's administration had achieved a peace treaty with the Indians south of the Ohio River, the Treaty of New York. Due to the diligence of Secretary of War Henry Knox, the American frontiersmen in Tennessee, although guilty of occasional transgressions, remained restrained enough to avoid full-scale war with the Indians there. In the Old Northwest, however, a confederation of tribes backed by British support emerged as a serious threat to the fledgling republic. The Ohio River was crucial to the economic well-being of the nation, and clashes throughout the valley were common. By June 1790 the violence there was serious enough for the Americans along that frontier to request federal assistance in quelling the Indians' attacks.¹⁴⁶

To that end Knox ordered an expedition under General Harmar and the governor of the Northwest Territory, Arthur St. Clair. The objective of the expedition was to destroy the Indian war parties that emanated from the area between the Wabash and Maumee Rivers. In a display of utter incompetence, a two-pronged assault into the area led to disaster. One wing of the attack turned back after making only half-hearted progress up the Wabash. The other wing suffered two ambushes by the Indians and fell back in disorder. Overall the

¹⁴⁴ Anthony Wallace, *Jefferson and the Indians: the tragic fate of the first Americans* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 206-240.

¹⁴⁵ See, for example, Jefferson to Carmichael and Short, Philadelphia, 1793, Washington ed., iv, 9.

performance of the militia was abysmal, while the regulars—small in number—proved generally reliable.¹⁴⁷

The following year, Washington, armed with a new act of Congress that allowed him to call up both militia and short-term volunteer levies to supplement the regular army, ordered St. Clair to conduct a swift campaign to retrieve the defeat of the previous year. The largely ill-trained, undisciplined rabble marched to the vicinity of present-day Fort Wayne, Indiana and camped along the Wabash River. The war chief of the Miami Indians, Little Turtle, organized a massive assault against the American force on the morning of November 4. St. Clair's militia fled almost immediately, while the governor led a bayonet charge by the regulars. Despite his individual heroism, the battle was decidedly against the small remaining forces, and St. Clair had to lead the survivors in a hasty retreat. The Indians had inflicted over 900 casualties on the Americans—the US Army's single worst defeat in history.¹⁴⁸

Washington was outraged and demanded that St. Clair resign from the army, which he did, while remaining governor. Washington then commissioned Anthony Wayne to settle the matter with the Indians in 1794. In the intervening two years, Congress authorized three new regiments, and Knox organized the Army into what became known as the Legion of the United States, with the men further organized into four sublegions. Wayne ruthlessly drilled the Legion, and

¹⁴⁶ Millett and Maslowski, *For the Common Defense*, 90-91.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 91.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 92.

in late 1793, Knox ordered him to move against the Indians.¹⁴⁹

As Wayne advanced and built forts along his route, the British responded by building Fort Miami along the Maumee, where two thousand Indians then gathered to receive British aid. Confident in their numbers, the Indians attacked Fort Recovery, which Wayne had built on the site of St. Clair's defeat. Although outnumbered 10-to-1, the American defenders held the Indians at bay. Later reinforced with 1500 Kentucky mounted rifles, Wayne moved out in late July to engage the combined force of Indians and the British. To his surprise and the Indians' consternation, however, the British had a change of heart and refused to support their former allies. At the Battle of Fallen Timbers, Wayne's Legion and volunteer auxiliaries routed the 500 Indians who had gathered for battle. With no further confidence in the British, and fearful of the reinvigorated US Army, the Indians signed the Treaty of Greenville, ceding most of Ohio and part of Indiana.¹⁵⁰

Although Thomas Jefferson was not directly involved in these operations or the decisions that led to them, he was intensely interested in America's Indian policy. Jefferson's attitude toward the American Indians was a mixture of admiration, contempt, sympathy, and fear. Discussing the value of an alliance with them against the British in 1776, Jefferson wrote to John Page "They are a useless, expensive, ungovernable ally."¹⁵¹ While he maintained an academic interest in their cultures, he nevertheless foresaw the destruction of their way of

¹⁴⁹ Richard Battin, "Mad Anthony Wayne at Fallen Timbers", *The News Sentinel*, Fort Wayne, IN, 1994, 4 Dec 2005, <http://earlyamerica.com/review/fall96/anthony.html>.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁵¹ Jefferson to John Page, Philadelphia, 1776, Ford ed., ii, 88.

life and professed a goal of amalgamating them into American agricultural society. "The ultimate happiness for them is...to intermix, and become one people."¹⁵²

His sincere respect for Indian culture combined with his nationalistic fear of the danger Indians represented, and long before he took office, Jefferson's views on Native Americans had coalesced with those of Washington and Hamilton. The Indians were a national security problem.¹⁵³ But they were only a part of the challenge of how to handle the fast-growing American west.

The American west of the early 19th century was a curious combination of burgeoning democracy, corrupt regional politics, and exciting opportunity. Although it was unclear whether the west would be incorporated as states into the Union, the region was nevertheless vital to the security and economic success of the nation. The Mississippi River, along with the Ohio River, constituted a major line of communication between the economies of the west and the vital port of New Orleans.

The politics of the east were deeply intertwined with the development of the western territories, not only because many politicians dabbled in land speculation, but also because those on either side of the slavery issue foresaw (incorrectly) its successful resolution in the west. Jefferson had called for the banning of slavery in the western territories, but the proposed ordinance of 1784 was narrowly defeated. The ban did go into effect in the Northwest Territory,

¹⁵² Jefferson to Hawkins, 1803. Washington ed. iv, 467

¹⁵³ Jefferson to Baron de Humboldt, 1813, Washington ed., vi, 269.

established by the Ordinance of 1787, but slavery was to remain a hot issue in the southern regions of the west. For the first half of the 19th century the west was to play the dual roles of ameliorating and furthering the political conflict between north and south.¹⁵⁴

With Spain in possession of Florida and the trans-Mississippi, the western territories were constantly threatened with war. Outright invasion along the American seacoast was a remote possibility, but conflict along the western borders was virtually inevitable. Further, Spain and England were more than willing to involve themselves in American politics, and throughout the west unscrupulous men were involved with Spanish and British intrigues.

In 1788, for example, Colonel Josiah Harmar arrested a dissident leader and warned the secretary of war that westerners had a plan to force the opening of the Mississippi by attacking the Spanish in Natchez or New Orleans. Harmar sent Ensign John Armstrong on a secret fact-finding trip through Franklin, Tennessee, where he reported on separatist plots and foreign influence.¹⁵⁵

William Blount, Federalist senator from Tennessee, concocted a plot with Robert Liston, British minister to the United States, in which British troops would march south from Canada, join with American frontiersmen, and march on Spanish Florida and Louisiana. The conspiracy was foiled when one of Blount's letters was leaked to the press. Blount was expelled from the Senate, but he returned to Tennessee and took over as president of the state senate there.¹⁵⁶ Benjamin

¹⁵⁴ Ellis, *Founding Brothers*, 81-119.

¹⁵⁵ William B. Skelton, *An American Profession of Arms: the army officer corps, 1784-1861*. Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1992, 71.

¹⁵⁶ Thomas P. Abernethy, *The Burr Conspiracy*. Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1968, 7.

Sebastian, Associate Justice of the Kentucky Court of Appeals, was also in Spanish pay, receiving a pension of \$2000 per year.¹⁵⁷ He was eventually exposed and had to resign, and in the wake of the scandal, several duels were fought between Republicans and Federalists in Kentucky.

Regular army officers were involved in numerous plots aimed at annexing Spanish Florida, and many wished for a war of conquest.¹⁵⁸ Jefferson, while not averse to a war with Spain (which he thought the most winnable of conflict scenarios), did not want to occasion the chaos and political crisis that would result from an independent movement by westerners.¹⁵⁹

The legislature of Georgia added to the confusion of the American west through the botched handling of the Yazoo land grants. In the wake of a campaign of corruption and bribery, they sold millions of acres of western land to speculators, including influential politicians from the northeast. When the corruption was exposed, the legislature nullified the transactions. Unfortunately, some of the land sold had already been resold to others. This resulted in long-term confusion over who had legitimate title to the lands in question.

The condition of the American West during Thomas Jefferson's presidency bore directly on his perspective of national security. Both George Washington and Thomas Jefferson contemplated the possibility that the western territories would at some point coalesce into a separate confederacy, hopefully friendly to but not part of the United States. Of paramount importance was that the west not be permitted to become a hostile neighbor, because such a power

¹⁵⁷ Ibid, 89.

¹⁵⁸ Skelton, *An American Profession of Arms*, 83.

would interdict the Mississippi. Regarding the various plans of governance being considered for the west, Jefferson wrote in 1786 of the need to allow the western territories to evolve into fully equal states enjoying self-government.¹⁶⁰

Thus part of Jefferson's western policy would be to forestall a split that might endanger the nation. Still, Jefferson looked to the west as the best hope for continued development of agriculture and democracy:

"It seems to me that in proportion as commercial avarice and corruption advance on us from the north and east, the principles of free government are to retire to the agricultural States of the south and west, as their last asylum and bulwark. With honesty and self-government for her portion, agriculture may abandon contentedly to others the fruits of commerce and corruption."¹⁶¹

Unfortunately, to realize his policy goals, he would have to rely upon men, some of whom were dubious and ill-motivated characters. To fully appreciate Jefferson's national security policy, it is necessary to see how vulnerable the republic was to foreign influence by examining the career of a prominent military leader at the time.

The Number 13

James Wilkinson, ranking general in the Army of the United States during the Jefferson administration, was in the pay of the Spanish.¹⁶² Wilkinson joined the Continental Army during the Revolutionary War and served honorably with a somewhat mixed record. He was part of Benedict Arnold's Quebec expedition (along with Aaron Burr) and later served as secretary of the Board of War.

¹⁵⁹ Cerami, *Jefferson's Great Gamble*, 13.

¹⁶⁰ Jefferson to Monroe, Paris, 1786; Washington ed. i, 587.

¹⁶¹ Jefferson to Henry Middleton, Monticello, Jan, 1813; Washington ed. vi, 91.

¹⁶² James Ripley Jacobs, *The Beginning of the U.S. Army, 1783-1812*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1947, 186, 254.

In 1777, following Horatio Gates' decisive success at Saratoga while Washington had been defeated at both Brandywine and Germantown, General Thomas Conway, angry with Washington, wrote a disparaging letter about the commanding general to Gates. Wilkinson, then serving on Gates' staff, misquoted a portion of the letter to General William Alexander, who in turn communicated Wilkinson's version to Washington. When Washington sent the letter to Gates, the latter defended himself and the matter became known to the Congress. The so-called "Conway Cabal" amounted to nothing, due mostly to Washington's reputation within Congress and in the public's eye, but it was the first of many dubious incidents in the life of James Wilkinson.¹⁶³ Toward the end of the war, Wilkinson became embroiled in a conflict with General Gates, who purportedly challenged his former staff officer to a duel. Although energetic, ambitious, and normally well thought of by his superiors, Wilkinson developed a reputation for shady dealings and for being overly outspoken concerning his opinion of superiors.¹⁶⁴

As Clothier-General of the Army, Wilkinson was accused of corruption and roundly criticized by Washington and others. As a result Wilkinson resigned his post and moved to Kentucky, where he pretended to represent a large mercantile association from Philadelphia.¹⁶⁵ Throughout the late 1780s, Wilkinson became a prominent figure in supporting Kentucky's efforts to separate from Virginia and become a state. Benefiting from his senior military rank, he used his personal

¹⁶³ Douglas S. Freeman, *Washington* (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1968), 378-79.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 616.

charisma to charm his fellow frontiersmen and became the center of the district's sectional politics. In 1786-87 the Virginia Assembly agreed in principle to the eventual separation of Kentucky, but it also imposed delays until Kentuckians could secure a guarantee that the United States would accept the district as a state, and until Kentucky derived a state constitution. The Northwest Ordinance of 1787 had provided a template for achieving statehood that would frame Kentucky's efforts, even though as a district of Virginia the new law did not apply directly to Kentucky. According to the law, a newly surveyed territory would be administered initially by a governor and judges appointed by the Congress of the United States. Upon achieving a population of 5,000 free males of voting age, the inhabitants would elect a territorial legislature, which would in turn send a non-voting delegate to Congress. When the territory's population reached 60,000 the legislature would submit a state constitution to Congress, who, if it approved of the constitution, would then accept the territory as a state. The delays implied by this system angered most of Kentucky's citizens, and Wilkinson set out to capitalize on their discontent.¹⁶⁶

In August, 1785 Wilkinson became a member of the Kentucky delegation to the third convention dealing with the district's separation from Virginia. Although the Virginia Assembly was favorable to the district's petition for separation, it also imposed a lengthy procedure that included a fourth convention

¹⁶⁵ James E. Savage, "Spaniards, Scoundrels, and Statesmen: General James Wilkinson and the Spanish Conspiracy, 1787-1790" in *Hanover History Review* [online journal], (vol. 6, Spring, 1998); 13 July 2005, http://history.hanover.edu/hhr/98/hhr98_1.html, 1-2.

¹⁶⁶ James E. Savage, "Spaniards, Scoundrels, and Statesmen: General James Wilkinson and the Spanish Conspiracy, 1787-1790" 16 June 2004, http://history.hanover.edu/hhr/98/hhr98_1.html, 4.

to confirm the people's desire to separate under the terms granted, and yet another convention to determine the degree to which Virginia laws would pertain during the course of separation. Wilkinson and his allies complained about the delays and pushed for unilateral separation. His position a popular one, the general was elected to represent the district again at the fourth convention. When this meeting was delayed and then undermined by further legislation by the Virginia Assembly, the political outrage in the Kentucky district accrued to Wilkinson's advantage.¹⁶⁷

The situation was exacerbated because the Spanish government in New Orleans refused to guarantee Americans the right to ship goods out of the port. For those farmers in the West who were at this time beginning to produce bumper crops, the Mississippi River was the only viable outlet for their goods. Shipping upstream along the Ohio River was too expensive, so New Orleans was vital to the economy of the west. The apathy of the Federalist Northeast angered citizens in the West and contributed to the general lack of loyalty to the United States found west of the Appalachians at this time. Wilkinson was perfectly positioned to turn this discontent into profit.¹⁶⁸

The general decided to take the matter in hand and negotiate a separate deal with the Spanish that would put control of Kentucky's trade in his hands. He bribed and talked his way down the Mississippi River in the spring of 1787, arriving in New Orleans in the summer of 1787 and proceeded to negotiate a deal with the Spanish governor there, Esteban Rodriguez Miro. Wilkinson

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ Cerami, *Jefferson's Great Gamble*, 12-13.

argued that if the Spanish would grant him a monopoly on the river trade, he in turn could use his considerable influence to further Spanish goals in western North America. In August, Wilkinson swore allegiance to Spain. His plan was to encourage the disaffection of Kentucky from the United States with a view to establishing at some point a western confederacy friendly to (or perhaps joined with) the Spanish Empire.¹⁶⁹ He instructed his Spanish contacts not to refer to him by name, but rather by his coded designation, the Number (or Agent) 13.

Wilkinson's introspection and comment on his own behavior is instructive regarding the ease with which loyalty to the national government was exchanged for personal gain.

Interest regulates the passions of Nations, as also those of individuals, and he who attributes a different motive to human affairs deceives himself or seeks to deceive others: although I sustain this great truth, I will not, however, deny that every man owes something to the land of his birth and in which he was educated.¹⁷⁰

Born and educated in America, I embraced its cause in the last revolution, and remained throughout faithful to its interest, until its triumph over its enemies: This occurrence has now rendered my services useless, discharged me of my pledge, dissolved my obligations, even those of nature, and left me at liberty, after having fought for her happiness, to seek my own; circumstances and the policies of the United States having made it impossible for me to obtain this desired end under its Government, I am resolved to seek it in Spain.¹⁷¹

Meanwhile, in Kentucky, the landless poor and small estate owners effected an alliance of sorts. The goal of the landless poor was a radical

¹⁶⁹ Savage, "Spaniards, Scoundrels, and Statesmen", 4-6.

¹⁷⁰ James Wilkinson, "Declaration" in Temple Bodley, introduction to *Reprints of Littell's Political Transactions in and Concerning Kentucky*, by William Littell (Louisville, KY: The Filson Club, 1926), cxxxvii, as quoted in Savage, 4.

redistribution of the land, which had been parceled out into large estates by Virginia. The lawyers, judges, and small estate owners, known as the court party, worked with them toward the goal of statehood. While the poor wanted access to cheap land, the court party wanted free navigation of the Mississippi. The district's wealthy landowners, known as the country party, opposed any move that would threaten their property and status, but they were ultimately persuaded that statehood would serve their interests as well.¹⁷² Wilkinson garnered political power by capitalizing on the fact that the eastern portion of the country considered freedom of navigation on the Mississippi a lesser priority than their Atlantic concerns. If their sentiments continued to dominate Congress, then Kentucky would have to act on its own to protect the people's interest there. He viewed a separation of the west as inevitable and warned his Spanish patrons that once separate, the west would have to ally either with Spain or with England. He assured them that he was their only hope to sway Kentucky over to their side, and he urged the Spanish to continue the blockage of trade, while simultaneously allowing private deals that would encourage the west to leave the United States.¹⁷³

From 1787 through 1789 the citizens of Kentucky—both court and country parties—pushed for statehood. While they had the support of both Virginia and the national Congress, the Constitutional Convention derailed the process. The

¹⁷¹ Ibid, 5.

¹⁷² Lowell H. Harrison, *Kentucky's Road to Statehood* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 1992), 17-18.

¹⁷³ James Wilkinson, "Memorial" in Temple Bodley, introduction to Reprints of *Littell's Political Transactions in and Concerning Kentucky*, by William Littell (Louisville, KY: The Filson Club, 1926), cxxx.

Congress meeting in New York eventually denied Kentucky statehood in anticipation of a new constitution, which was then being ratified. Wilkinson saw this impasse as a golden opportunity to encourage his countrymen in Kentucky to declare independence from the United States and to ally themselves with Spain. In the end, most of the citizens, although angry and frustrated at the Congress, elected to remain with the United States, and Wilkinson's plot fell apart.¹⁷⁴

His failure led Wilkinson to strengthen his ties to the Spanish in New Orleans, and he pressed his case hard there, insisting that he alone could further Spanish interests in Kentucky. He continually sought money and land from Governor Miro, but the Spanish began to lose interest in Wilkinson and his designs. The "Spanish Conspiracy" was over. By 1791, Wilkinson despaired of his Kentucky plan, and he left the state, accepting a commission in the United States Army again. Kentucky became a state the following year.¹⁷⁵

After his promotion to brigadier general in 1792, Wilkinson attempted to purge the army of the officers who were still serving who came from the old First Regiment. He represented this effort as an attempt to rid the army of incompetent and unethical men, but the evidence points more to personal dislike of officers who would not accept the patronage of the ambitious general. When Major General Anthony Wayne took command following the disastrous Indian campaigns of 1790-91, Wilkinson embarked on a deliberate campaign of agitation against his senior. Even after Wayne's splendid victory at Fallen

¹⁷⁴ Savage, "Spaniards, Scoundrels, and Statesmen", 15-17.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid, 21.

Timbers, Wilkinson continued to criticize him until Wayne's death in 1796.¹⁷⁶

The character of James Wilkinson was a testimony to the dangers that threatened the infant United States from within. With no compunction toward serving foreign interests and selling his services to Spanish agents, the general was a caricature of the nefarious adventurer from whom men of virtue had to protect the public interest. Yet due to the party factionalism within the army, Wilkinson remained a political ally of Jefferson's, and the Republican leader needed the support of the general. In later years, President Jefferson would make use of Wilkinson and rely upon him to help thwart the Burr conspiracy. Jefferson was aware of the general's suspicious behavior and dubious loyalties, but Wilkinson was a useful man in promoting Jefferson's agendas with the army, the navy, and against Aaron Burr.¹⁷⁷ Although he ultimately allied with Wilkinson against Burr, Jefferson's deepest fears about corruption and abuse of power were personified in men like the Number 13.

Growing Concerns: The Whiskey Rebellion and the Jay Treaty

By 1794 citizens of western Pennsylvania were ready for a fight. The defects of early American governance were coalescing to produce an increasingly intolerable situation for farmers there, and discontent arose from many causes. Large numbers of absentee landlords created a socio-economic cauldron of angry disputes. Judicial resolution of conflicts on the western frontier

¹⁷⁶ William B. Skelton, *An American Profession of Arms: the army officer corps, 1784-1861*. Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1992, 51.

required arduous journeys to Philadelphia. To the west, farmers found their access to the Mississippi restricted, and the federal government was continually lax in providing protection from Indians. The final straw was Alexander Hamilton's excise tax (1791), which was perceived as targeting poor farmers in favor of the urban elite.

The tax on whiskey was set at seven cents per gallon, with some exceptions. But since the tax was collected when the product was distilled (rather than when it was sold), it fell even on whiskey intended for the farmers' own consumption. Further, since whiskey sold for about twenty-five cents per gallon west of the Appalachians but for fifty cents per gallon to the east, the tax rate was respectively 28% and 14%, thus leaving the impression of unfairness against westerners. In spring, 1792, the state legislature reduced the tax somewhat but increased the fines levied for non-compliance.¹⁷⁸

Violence against government agents trying to set up tax offices or otherwise enforce the excise began in 1791 and worsened the following summer, when General John Neville, defending his home against a local militia who were demanding redress, killed one man and wounded many more. Two years later in the summer of 1794, militia again attacked and burned the general's home. In early August, a newly formed militia of about six thousand men marched through Pittsburgh demanding the removal of anyone associated with the excise tax.¹⁷⁹

Washington responded by forming a large army and marching into

¹⁷⁷ Jefferson, *The Anas*, October, 1806, Ford ed., i, 319.

¹⁷⁸ C. M. Ewing, "The Whiskey Tax and John Neville" (1930), <http://www.whiskeyrebellion.org/legislat.html>

western Pennsylvania. By the time he reached Bedford in October, 1794 the insurrectionists had dispersed, but Washington's troops gathered up suspected rebels and carted them off to Philadelphia to stand trial. The president's heavy-handed response was thought to be the work of Alexander Hamilton, whom some accused of orchestrating the entire affair in order to further his own designs.¹⁸⁰ Jefferson believed Hamilton was at the bottom of a conspiracy aimed at causing and then crushing an insurrection.

[I]t answered the favorite purposes of strengthening government and increasing public debt; and, therefore, an insurrection was announced and proclaimed, and armed against, but could never be found.¹⁸¹

To Madison, he complained that the army sent into western Pennsylvania was ineffective and could have been easily destroyed if the locals had desired to do so. Instead, they let the army pass while their resentment toward the government deepened.

[T]heir detestation of the excise law is universal, and has now associated to it a detestation of the government; and that a separation which was perhaps a very distant and problematical event, is now near, and certain, and determined in the mind of every man.¹⁸²

By the time the Rebellion was resolved, Jefferson had already resigned his post as secretary of state, replaced by Edmund Randolph has assumed duties as the nation's secretary of state. French minister to the United States,

¹⁷⁹ Thomas B. Slaughter, *The Whiskey Rebellion: frontier epilogue to the American Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 175-189.

¹⁸⁰ Thomas Hart, "The Whiskey Rebellion: reasons for dissension and insurrection", <http://www.whiskeyrebellion.org/rebell.htm>.

¹⁸¹ Jefferson to Monroe, Ford ed., vii, 16.

Joseph Faucher, wrote an account of an interview with Randolph that was subsequently intercepted by the British and given to Washington. The dispatch implicated Randolph in a conspiracy to financially support the insurrection, and it quoted him as opposing the government's policy, causing Randolph to resign his post.¹⁸³

The Whiskey Rebellion thus left a scar on Washington's administration and reinforced Thomas Jefferson's loathing of Hamiltonian Federalism and its coercive use of the military. As he developed his military policy, Jefferson sought for ways to prevent such uses of the army and the civil war that might result.

The most defining point of contention between the factions coalescing around Hamilton and Jefferson during Washington's administration was the Jay Treaty (signed, 1794; ratified 1795) negotiated by John Jay and his English counterpart, Lord William Grenville. It was also the watershed event that led to Jefferson's complete disaffection from Washington and the Federalists. To this day historians debate whether the Jay Treaty was a clumsy American misstep or a masterstroke of strategic genius. It was, perhaps, both.¹⁸⁴

Washington was determined to avoid a war with England, and in 1794 he tapped Chief Justice John Jay to go to London to negotiate a treaty. When Jay returned the following year, he brought an agreement that appeared to give everything to the British while getting very little in return. English imports to

¹⁸² Jefferson to Madison, Washington ed., iv, 12.

¹⁸³ Joseph J. Ellis, *Founding Brothers: the Revolutionary generation* (New York: Vintage Books, 2000), 146-47.

¹⁸⁴ Ellis, *Founding Brothers*, 136.

America would be taxed at most favored nation rates, while American goods exported to England would be assessed higher tariffs. Pre-Revolutionary War debts owed to British creditors would be paid, and since most of the debtors were Virginians (a largely Republican state), it was inevitable that Jefferson's cohorts would oppose the agreement. The treaty also left the issue of impressments untouched, in apparent deference to the Royal Navy.¹⁸⁵

In return for all this, the British agreed to evacuate their remaining posts on American soil, and they agreed to consider claims by American merchants for cargoes confiscated by the British at sea. These concessions seemed minuscule compared to what London gained from the agreement, and the Republican response to the treaty was ferocious. Washington and Hamilton came under personal attack in the press and from crowds turned out in protest. To some the proposed treaty seemed like a humiliating surrender to British military domination. To the Republican leadership, it was "a repudiation of the Declaration of Independence, the Franco-American alliance, [and] the revolutionary movement sweeping through Europe..."¹⁸⁶

Jefferson led the charge from his mountain retreat at Monticello. After an abortive attempt to insist that the House of Representatives had to endorse any treaty proposed by the executive, he bitterly conceded defeat and complained that it was Washington's undue influence over the American people that doomed the Republicans' efforts to block the treaty. But since Washington was soon to retire, Jefferson's many supporters saw the Jay Treaty as the catalyst for starting

¹⁸⁵ Freeman, *Washington*, 661-662.

a presidential campaign designed to install him as the nation's next chief executive.¹⁸⁷

Jefferson's private comments on the treaty included withering criticism of Washington and his administration and characterized them as traitors to American liberty. When this assessment found its way into the newspaper, it led to a permanent break in the friendship Jefferson had enjoyed with the president. Jefferson's overstated response to the Jay Treaty burned the bridge between him and his fellow revolutionaries who clung to Hamiltonian Federalism. But the Republican passion against the treaty would ultimately be in vain. When Madison tried to nullify the key provisions of the treaty in Congress, he was singularly ineffective, primarily because of the difficulty in fighting against anything that Washington endorsed. The treaty was ratified, but its ramifications would come to plague the Federalists during the Adams administration.¹⁸⁸

John Adams Takes the Helm

The election of 1796 pitted two seemingly unwilling candidates against each other. The Federalists looked to John Adams, and the Republicans to Thomas Jefferson. The relationship between the two men was still mostly cordial when Adams was elected as president and Jefferson as vice president, and there was a brief period during which it appeared that the two might be able to work together. But by the time the new administration took office, events were

¹⁸⁶ Joseph P. Ellis, *American Sphinx: the character of Thomas Jefferson* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 188.

¹⁸⁷ Ellis, *Founding Brothers*, 136-145.

¹⁸⁸ Susan Dunn, *Jefferson's Second Revolution: the election crisis of 1800 and the triumph of Republicanism* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004), 66-69, 96-100.

overtaking what good will remained between them.¹⁸⁹

The French had reacted to the Jay Treaty as Jefferson predicted they would: they saw it as a pro-British treaty, which in fact it was. Rebuffed in their demand for equal treatment by the Americans, the French began to prey upon American merchantmen in the Caribbean in order to pressure President Adams. The conflict grew and became known as the Quasi-War—a desultory and relatively small-scale conflict fought exclusively at sea. The military implications of the conflict were minimal, but the diplomatic ramifications were many as the Adams administration struggled to find a rational French policy.

As the bifurcation between Federalists and Republicans deepened during the Adams administration, the former, working at first through the judiciary, began to encroach upon freedom of speech. When a Federalist judge, Associate Justice James Iredell of the federal circuit court at Richmond, influenced the grand jury to issue charges against Congressman Samuel J. Cabell, a Republican, charging him with lying about the government in a circular letter to his constituents in Virginia, Republicans throughout the state were outraged. Jefferson took the lead in fighting against what he viewed as an attack against the basic rights of citizens. Working behind the scenes, he organized a petition against the Federalist charges and had it introduced to the Virginian House of Delegates—an action calculated to emphasize states' sovereignty. The charges against Cabell were never pressed, but two trends emerged from the Cabell Affair. First was the Federalists' readiness to suppress free speech—a trend that would lead to the Alien and Sedition Acts. Secondly, Jefferson's use of a state

¹⁸⁹ David McCullough, *John Adams* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001), 473-475.

legislature to fight against the Federalist judiciary prefigured his later involvement in the Kentucky and Virginia Resolves. Before the first year of Adams' administration had ended, Jefferson was firmly convinced that Federalists intended to destroy the basic liberties described in the Bill of Rights and his convictions would inflame him and other Republicans with the desire to rid the country of Federalism permanently.¹⁹⁰

The disaffection between Jefferson and the administration came to a head over foreign relations. In 1798, President Adams sent a three man delegation to France to try to find a solution for the conflict between the two former allies. When Charles Cotesworth Pinckney, John Marshall, and Elbridge Gerry arrived in Paris, the French refused to negotiate with them. Agents of Talleyrand instead demanded the Americans apologize for anti-French comments made by John Adams the previous year. They were also told that if they hoped to be admitted into negotiations, they would have to pay a substantial bribe to French officials.

When news of the rebuff reached the United States in March, 1798, it caused a curious set of reactions between Republicans and the Adams administration. In retrospect it is certain that neither Jefferson nor Adams desired war with France, but when Adams withheld the details of what would soon become known as the XYZ Affair in order to calm war fever, Jefferson attributed exactly the opposite motives to his president. The Republicans asserted that Adams was manipulating events and information to bring about a

¹⁹⁰ David N. Mayer, *The Constitutional Thought of Thomas Jefferson* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1994), 199-203.

war with France (and perhaps an alliance with England). Jefferson even claimed that the Adams administration had made up the whole incident.¹⁹¹ At the same time, he foresaw a public reaction that would work against the Federalists.

You know what a wicked use has been made of the French negotiation; and particularly the X. Y. Z. dish cooked up by Marshall, where the swindlers are made to appear as the French government...If the understanding of the people could be rallied to the truth on this subject, by exposing the dupery practiced on them, there are so many other things about to bear on them favorably for the resurrection of their republican spirit, that a reduction of the administration to constitutional principles cannot fail to be the effect.¹⁹²

When Congress compelled Adams to release the dispatches describing the treatment of the American delegation, the country erupted with war fever. With the tide of public opinion surging in favor of the administration, Jefferson tried to calm the storm by insisting that no official agents of the French government had been implicated in the affair (and that, by extension, America could not hold Paris responsible), and that Adams' indiscreet comments in 1797 were the main obstacle to peace. He made it clear that he and his fellow Republicans believed war with France would be ill-advised—merely another opportunity for Hamiltonian monarchists to increase their influence and cuddle up to England.

Despite Jefferson's warnings, war fever raged. Congress appropriated money to construct a navy, created the Navy Department, and began to commission privateers to capture French ships. But what alarmed the

¹⁹¹ Jefferson to Madison, 5 April, 1798, Lipscomb, et al. *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson* (Washington, DC: The Thomas Jefferson Memorial Association, 1903), 58.

¹⁹² Jefferson to Edmund Pendleton, Philadelphia, 1799, Washington ed., iv, 274.

Republicans even more was the administration's plans for the army. Even if Federalists and Republicans could have agreed in principle on the need for some professional military force, the real fundamental break between the two parties came over the size of that establishment. By 1798 Alexander Hamilton had been promoted to major general and served as inspector general—in essence second in command—under Washington. His new mission was to prepare for a war against France.¹⁹³ As a result of the war fever following the XYZ Affair, Hamilton called for a militarization program that was unprecedented in scope. At the same time that Congress passed the infamous Alien and Sedition Acts, it also created a 10,000 man Provisional Army to be raised in the event of war. The legislation also allowed the president to accept volunteer companies into national service—a procedure somewhat akin to issuing a letter of marque to a privateer. Four months later, Congress authorized Adams to raise a “New Army” of twelve infantry regiments and six troops of dragoons. It also made provision for an “Eventual Army” that the president could mobilize in an emergency.¹⁹⁴

Hamilton focused his attention on the New Army, which was the only one mobilized for the crisis with France. With the old regular Army deployed in the west, the New Army would be the one to fight any invasion by France. Washington agreed to be the commander of the combined military forces, but he insisted that Hamilton be his second in command, and Washington would actually take the field only in an emergency. Although John Adams distrusted

¹⁹³ Earle, Edward Mead, “Adam Smith, Alexander Hamilton, Friedrich List: The Economic Foundations of Military Power”, *Makers of Modern Strategy: military thought from Machiavelli to Hitler*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1943, 128.

Hamilton, his hand was forced, and Hamilton took charge of the New Army. Ever suspicious of the Republicans as potential Jacobins, Hamilton forbade any of that party to be in the officer corps. Thus, the New Army was explicitly a political army. Hamilton also made clear his sentiments during the political conflict over the Alien and Sedition Acts when he voiced his desire to take the New Army on a march through Virginia to quell the opposition.¹⁹⁵ In the event the only real action that Hamilton's creation ever saw was putting down a small tax revolt in Pennsylvania in 1799, which became known as Fries' Rebellion.

Jefferson viewed the Federalist military as a direct threat to democracy. Shortly after the election crisis of 1800-01, in which Jefferson and Burr tied in the number of votes received, Jefferson reflected on what might have happened during the impasse had the Federalist New Army still been functioning: "How happy that our army had been disbanded! What might have happened otherwise seems rather a subject of reflection than explanation."¹⁹⁶ (He was referring to rumors that some Federalists favored resolving the election deadlock by restoring their party to control of the government by force of arms.) In order to fund the Adams administration's military initiatives, Congress went on to impose a direct tax on land, houses, and slaves in order to fund the accretions in the army and navy—another step that Jefferson saw as a violation of the principles of the Revolution.¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁴ Millett & Maslowski, *For the Common Defense: a military history of the United States of America*. New York: The Free Press, 1984; 96.

¹⁹⁵ Ellis, *Founding Brothers*, 194.

¹⁹⁶ Jefferson to Nathaniel Niles, Esq., Washington, 22 March 1801; Lipscomb, Andrew A., et al., *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*. Washington, DC: The Thomas Jefferson Memorial Association, 1903; p. 233.

¹⁹⁷ Cunningham, *In Pursuit of Reason*, 214-15.

Hamilton's view of the size and use of the military was anathema to Republicans, and much of the Jefferson's first term would be taken up with disestablishing the Hamiltonian military construct. Jefferson viewed both the army and navy as an expense which would lead to further corruption within the government. And whereas a sea-going navy had a place in Jefferson's military policy, a huge army did not. He saw it through the eyes of Bolingbroke as a threat to liberty, which, in the hands of a Hamilton, it was. If any Republicans still needed proof of the Federalists' nefarious intentions toward American liberty, they were about to get it.

To understand the full context of Jefferson's military policy, one must come to grips with the Adams administration's infamous legislative attempt to prevent any insidious behavior by French spies or their sympathizers in the United States. While the threat of foreigners illegally influencing politics was real, the Alien Act allowed the president to imprison or deport citizens of foreign nations, and it increased the time requirement for naturalization from five to fourteen years. While this portion of the legislation was arguably constitutional, the Sedition Act, which allowed the government to fine or imprison anyone who encouraged resistance to federal laws or who criticized the government, clearly was not.

Concerning the Alien and Sedition Acts, Jefferson wrote:

"For my own part, I consider those laws as merely an experiment on the American mind, to see how far it will bear an avowed violation of the Constitution. If this goes down, we shall immediately see attempted another act of Congress, declaring that

the President shall continue in office during life, reserving to another occasion the transfer of the succession to his heirs, and the establishment of the Senate for life.”¹⁹⁸

Jefferson was likely exaggerating for effect, but not by much. He watched with horror as Congress passed the Alien and Sedition Acts—the latter obviously unconstitutional, since it restricted freedom of speech—and he saw a mortal threat to the republic. The excesses that could be justified under the rubric of national security could easily propel the young nation down the same path as the French Revolution. To Jefferson the Alien and Sedition Acts were reprehensible abuses of power, and with the government contemplating a sizable military establishment, all the components of tyranny were in place. He correctly judged this threat as far more substantial than that of a foreign invasion.

In response to the hateful legislation, Jefferson and Madison turned to the pen. Working from Monticello, Jefferson composed the Kentucky Resolve—a document that revealed the vice president’s occasional lack of discretion, since it stated openly that if a state disagreed with federal legislation, the state could secede: “...to sever ourselves from that union we so much value, rather than give up the rights of self-government which we have reserved, & in which alone we see liberty, safety & happiness.”¹⁹⁹ Madison, writing the Virginia Resolution, took a calmer and more politic approach. He declared the Alien and Sedition Acts to be unconstitutional, not only because they sought to restrict freedom of expression, but also because they usurped prosecutorial power from the states. Jefferson followed the advice of his friend to restrain his language a bit, but the

¹⁹⁸ Jefferson to Stephens Thompson Mason, Monticello, 11 Oct 1798, Lipscomb, 62.

¹⁹⁹ Jefferson, as quoted in Koch and Ammon, 1948, p. 166.

vice president clearly believed that states could and might have to assert themselves against the power of the central government. Although he avoided the term “nullification,” Jefferson clearly implied that states had such power.²⁰⁰

In order to pay for all of its planned military upgrades, the Adams administration needed money. At the same time that they passed the Alien and Sedition Acts, Congress levied a House Tax, the intent of which was to raise \$2 million. Of that sum, Pennsylvania was to contribute \$237,000. Since there were few slaves in the Commonwealth, the tax burden would have to fall on dwellings. This tax was variously known as a Window Tax (since number and size of windows was a criteria), the Hot Water Tax (due to reports of women dumping hot water on assessors counting windows), and the Milford Tax (commemorating the perceived center of the resistance).

John Fries, the son of an immigrant, was a cooper and an auctioneer in Trumbauersville, Pennsylvania. Ironically, he had been part of the State Guard that was sent to quell the Whiskey Rebellion in 1786. But in 1798 he rose to lead the resistance against the hated House Tax. Under his leadership an armed band traveled the countryside harassing tax assessors and threatening the lives of anyone who attempted to collect the tax. When Fries learned that some men from Millerstown had been arrested for tax revolt, he set off to forcibly recover the prisoners. Outnumbered by Fries' men, the marshal complied with the rebel's demands and surrendered the prisoners.

Despite this triumph, the government was able to rally support, and

²⁰⁰ Jefferson to Wilson C. Nicholas, Monticello, 5 Sep 1799; Lipscomb, et al., eds, *The Writings of*

throughout the spring of 1799 marshals and local troops were able to arrest most of Fries' compatriots. Fries himself was captured in April when his little dog, "Whiskey", betrayed his hiding place. Fries was taken to Philadelphia and tried for his crimes. He was eventually sentenced under the Sedition Act to be hanged for treason, but President Adams pardoned Fries and the other men two days before their execution date.²⁰¹

What concerned Jefferson most about the whole affair was the Federalists' disproportionate response to the rebellion. Major General Alexander Hamilton urged the War Department to move against the uprising with a huge, powerful force: "Whenever the Government appears in arms it ought to appear like a *Hercules*, and inspire respect by a display of strengths."²⁰² Although no blood was shed during the suppression of the uprising, Republicans watched with horror at the use of the military to coerce civilians.

The innate fear of the military derived partly from radical Whig ideology, but also from experience. Throughout the early national period there were incidents and allegations of military officers inappropriately using soldiers to interfere with elections, appointments, and other political issues.²⁰³ The Federalist response to Fries' Rebellion reinforced Republican fears that America could degenerate into the terror that had gripped France.

Conclusion--The Revolution of 1800

Thomas Jefferson. Washington DC: The Thomas Jefferson Memorial Association, 1903; 131.

²⁰¹ Cunningham, *In Pursuit of Reason*, 273.

²⁰² Hamilton to McHenry, 18 March, 1799, *Papers of Hamilton*, 22: 552-553.

²⁰³ Skelton, *An American Profession of Arms*, 84.

The mood of suspicion and conspiracy that pervaded the election of 1800 likewise colored Jefferson's concerns about national security. In January, 1799, Jefferson wrote to James Monroe,

I shall seldom write to you, on account of the strong suspicions of infidelity in the post offices. Always examine the seal before you open my letters, & note whether the impression is distinct.²⁰⁴

In another letter to Elbridge Gerry he implores his correspondent to destroy parts of the letter after reading it and notes that he and Gerry must behave as secretly as if they were revolutionaries trying to destroy the country.²⁰⁵

Modern political factionalism has nothing on the first generation of the American republic. The bitter wrangling, mud-slinging, and character assassination that went on as the country prepared for the election of 1800 was scarcely a step away from violent upheaval. Hamilton's desire to form a "Christian Constitutional Society" to counteract the "Jacobin clubs" and "democratic societies" pointed to a deep polarization between the Federalists and the Republicans.²⁰⁶ Fortunately for the latter, Adams, in a bold and independent move, sent a delegation to France in 1799 to see if he could head off a war. When the effort resulted in peace with France, it served to split Federalists into a Hamiltonian wing and an Adams wing.

The religious fervor expressed in the country's newspapers became an important part of the election of 1800, given Jefferson's record of disestablishmentarianism and his long sojourn among the French—seen by

²⁰⁴ Jefferson to Monroe, 23 Jan, 1799, *The Works of Thomas Jefferson in Twelve Volumes*, Paul L. Ford, ed., Volume IX. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1905, 12.

²⁰⁵ Jefferson to Gerry, 26 Jan, 1799, *The Works of Thomas Jefferson in Twelve Volumes*, 26.

Federalists as the very definition of ungodliness. Beyond mere criticisms of this modern day “Rehoboam”—interesting for the implied threat of secession in the event of his election—Jefferson came under slanderous attacks accusing him of everything from robbery to treason.²⁰⁷ New England clergymen spurred on their flocks with warnings that Jefferson’s victory would lead to Bible-burning, Jacobin paganism, and the legalization of prostitution.²⁰⁸

In the months running up to the election both Federalists and Republicans fell into bitter partisan and personal attacks on the candidates. In a letter to Uriah Gregory, 13 August 1800, Jefferson complained of the slander of Reverend Cotton Mather Smith, who claimed Jefferson “had obtained my property by fraud and robbery; that in one instance, I had defrauded and robbed a widow and fatherless children of an estate to which I was executor, of ten thousand pounds sterling, by keeping the property and paying them in money at the nominal rate, when it was worth no more than forty for one; and that all this could be proved.”²⁰⁹

Jefferson had to endure attacks upon his character, his family background, and his alleged treasonous connections to France:

Tom Jefferson...who, to make the best of him, was nothing but a mean-spirited, low-lived fellow, the son of a half-breed Indian squaw, sired by a Virginia mulatto father, as was well-known in the neighbourhood where he was raised wholly on hoe-cake (made of coarse-ground Southern corn), bacon and hominy, with an occasional change of fricasseed bullfrog, for which abominable reptiles he had acquired a taste during his residence among the

²⁰⁶ Albert J. Nock, *Jefferson* (New York: Brace & Co., 1926), 234.

²⁰⁷ Nock, *Jefferso*, 236.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 238.

²⁰⁹ Jefferson to Uriah Gregory, Monticello, 13 Aug 1800; Lipscomb, et al., eds., *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*. Washington DC: The Thomas Jefferson Memorial Association, 1903; 171.

French at Paris, to whom there could be no question he would sell his country at the first offer made to him cash down, should he be elected to fill the Presidential chair.²¹⁰

The strong political feelings in 1800 were almost apocalyptic, each side believing that disaster was just around the corner:

“From the pulpit rang cries of despair and doom; dishonesty as well as panic had invaded the marketplace; liars and libelers made a travesty of freedom of the press; violence, hysteria, and paranoia infested the public councils...Federalists felt betrayed by an ungrateful people for whom they had labored long and well, and feared that the horrors of Jacobinism and anarchy were hourly imminent...Republicans felt betrayed by the twin evils of money and monarchy, and feared that liberty was about to breathe its last.”²¹¹

Despite the feeling of urgency among Federalists not to allow Jefferson's Republicans to gain power, Adams' decision to make peace with France split the Hamiltonian Federalists from the Adams Federalists, handing a considerable advantage to the Republicans. Adams wanted peace with France as much as Jefferson did, but his decision to seek it in the face of contradictory sentiments among his Federalist allies was both audacious and disastrous for his political fortunes.²¹² Jefferson's party also benefited from superior political organization, with the result that Adams would be swept out of office. The election of 1800 resulted in a tie between Thomas Jefferson and Aaron Burr—a tie resolved by the smallest of margins when Alexander Hamilton (a political rival of Burr's) threw his influence in favor of Jefferson. Burr rankled after coming so close to the

²¹⁰ *The Jonnycake Papers*, as quoted in Albert Jay Nock, *Jefferson* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1926), 233-34.

²¹¹ Forrest McDonald, *The Presidency of Thomas Jefferson*, New York: Macmillan Press, 1976, pp1-2.

presidency, and in his later plots he frequently made reference to getting vengeance for being cheated out of the office. Hence, Jefferson took office without a clear mandate, and in a time of the strongest political sentiments on both sides. The danger of insurrection or even civil war was real.

As Thomas Jefferson prepared to take office as the nation's chief executive, a unique and peculiar mix of factors combined to threaten the course of the young republic. First, America was home to a generation of revolutionaries. The men who populated the republic at the turn of the century remembered the revolution against British rule as the high point of their lives. It defined them, and while the majority of them were in agreement in their anger at the shared deprivations described in the Declaration of Independence, they did not all agree on a vision for what was to replace British rule. Men who could muster the courage to rebel once could do so again, particularly if they felt their private interests were threatened.

Secondly, no one was certain whether the American republic could survive the party factionalism of 1800. As John Adams sneaked out of the capital on the morning of Jefferson's inauguration, there was fear that a general purge might follow the triumph of the Republicans. With a fearful example of excess unfolding across the Atlantic, Federalists braced for the worst. Without the tradition of two-party peaceful rivalry that would come in the future, Federalists feared that Jefferson's accession to power might spark widespread violence. In

²¹² Susan Dunn, *Jefferson's Second Revolution: the election crisis of 1800 and the triumph of Republicanism* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2004), 158-66.

the political conflicts of the past four years, both Federalists and Republicans had appealed for an armed solution at one time or another.

Thus although Jefferson viewed his victory as “the revolution of 1800”, he also had every reason to go slow and build bi-partisan support for his vision. On the one hand he had to undo the High Federalism of Hamilton, but on the other he had to assure everyone but the “die-hard monarchists” that they could find a role in the new political economy. His view of national security following such a close election thus transcended purely military issues.

His entry into the presidency would occur at a time when threats to the Constitution abounded both without and within the United States. The threat of foreign invasion was real, and in combination with attempts to subvert the Indian tribes against the nation, it posed a serious, perhaps insurmountable military problem. But at the same time, there were serious threats from domestic sources. Unscrupulous men, some of whom felt no strong loyalty to either the Constitution nor to Jefferson, were ready and able to act as agents for foreign governments. Jefferson’s triumph left a large, vocal, and potentially violent body of Federalists who might be willing to take up arms against their own nation. Finally, the several states that composed the fledgling republic were resolved to limit the reach of the central government and, if provoked, would threaten secession and perhaps civil war.

Thus, as Thomas Jefferson prepared to take the reins of government in 1801, the United States of America faced one of the most dangerous moments of its history. The solutions to such a multifaceted national security problem were

not easy to deduce, and Jefferson would have to develop a military and security policy that would protect the nation from both internal and external threats.

CHAPTER THREE

Laying the Foundation—Institutional Changes During Jefferson's First Term: 1801-04

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It is commonly held by historians that Thomas Jefferson emasculated the army, cutting appropriations and purging Federalists from the officer corps.²¹³ Ideologically and practically opposed to the military establishment, Jefferson, according to tradition, presided over a disastrous reduction of the army, which in turn constrained the nation's foreign policy during Jefferson's administration, and led to the army's marginal performance during the War of 1812. By over-relying on the state militias, he ensured that both they and the rump regular Army would be equally inadequate when put to the test of war. His stance concerning the question of the need for a standing army was infamous—he claimed that the young republic could not maintain a standing army because “we have no paupers to compose it.”²¹⁴

But a careful examination of Jefferson's record tells a radically different story. His effect on the size and training of the army at the beginning of his administration was actually marginal and resulted initially in a military force not

²¹³ Lance Benning, *The Jeffersonian Persuasion: Evolution of a Party Ideology*; Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978, pp. 289-90. See also Alfred Thayer Mahan, *Sea Power and its Relations to the War of 1812* (New York: Reprint Services Corp, 1905) 1: 296; and Forrest McDonald, *The Presidency of Thomas Jefferson* (Kansas City: University of Kansas Press, 1976), 44.

²¹⁴ Jacobs, James R., *The Beginning of the US Army, 1783-1812*; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1947; p. 12.

easily distinguished from that of the Adams administration. Jefferson, despite some of his unfortunate quotes, was not ideologically or practically opposed to the military; on the contrary he displayed a moderate and balanced approach to military affairs. Indeed, during the years of Jefferson's presidency, the army was expanded threefold. Further, the record is clear that he did not purge the army of Federalists, but only of those suspected of graft, incompetence, or extreme political views.

If we strip away the political accusations of both sides and penetrate beyond the ideological statements of both Federalists and Republicans, it is possible to comprehend both the points of agreement and the essential differences between Jefferson's views on the one hand, and those of Adams, Hamilton, and Washington on the other. In short, while all parties perceived foreign and domestic threats, Washington and his Federalist successors were focused on external threats to the country. Jefferson was far more concerned about the effects of his military policy on the domestic front. National security in Jefferson's mind was not a matter of defending the shores, but rather one of defending the integrity and liberty of the nation from threats within.

Jefferson's first address to Congress in 1801 announced the imminent end to hostilities between England and France and looked to that happy occasion as the context for "demolishing useless structures of expense, lightening the burthens of our constituents, and fortifying the principles of free government."²¹⁵ The preliminary articles of the Treaty of London, 1801 led eventually to the ill-fated Treaty of Amiens in 1802, by which, along with minor territorial

adjustments, England and France would be at peace. Although it was easy to underestimate the troubles that French and Spanish colonial interests would lead to, the potential “peace dividend” that the English-French treaty promised would be central to Jefferson’s military policy. The storms of 1805 were a distant and perhaps unforeseeable danger, and the time seemed right for Jefferson’s new administration, which was ideologically opposed to war and a large, expensive military establishment, to disarm—or at least pare the military down to size. Even the immediate crisis of Tripoli’s declaration of war on the United States was a relatively minor affair, and one that would have little to do with army appropriations. In the words of Dumas Malone, “...beyond any doubt the President, during his first year in office, acted as though he expected no early breach of the peace, pursuing his program of economy and democratization to the utmost while the sun was shining.”²¹⁶

“The energies of the nation, as depends on me, shall be reserved for improvement of the condition of man, not wasted in his distinction. The lamentable resource of war is not authorized for evils of imagination, but for those actual injuries only, which would be more destructive of our well-being than war itself. Peace, justice, and liberal intercourse with all the nations of the world, will, I hope, with all nations, characterize this commonwealth.”²¹⁷

The ideological dimensions of Jefferson’s world view and, incidentally, of his military policy, derived from Viscount Bolingbroke’s Tory opposition to the ministry of Sir Robert Walpole. In the eighteenth century, the Whigs represented

²¹⁵ Jefferson to Gov. Joseph Bloomfield, Washington, 5 Dec 1801, Ford ed. ix, 113.

²¹⁶ Malone, *Jefferson and His Time*, iv, 248.

²¹⁷ Jefferson to Messrs. Eddy, Russel, Thurber, Weaton, and Smith, Washington, 27 Mar 1801; Lipscomb, Andrew A., et al., *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*. Washington, DC: The Thomas Jefferson Memorial Association, 1903; p. 249.

the new capitalism of pre-industrial England. They maintained their control of parliament through patronage, bribery, and coercion. Whig ideology saw as advantageous both war and high taxes, and the king was able to maintain his control of the Commons by filling it with soldiers and pensioners, whose loyalty to the crown could be counted on. Bolingbroke railed against this system, defining it as corrupt and a threat to English liberties.

Bolingbroke and the Tories believed that, in the context of the mixed and balanced government of England, court influence and a standing army were destructive of virtue and good governance.²¹⁸ These same ideas were revitalized in the Republican party during the 1790s, and Jefferson carried them into his administration. The opposition's perspective was that war was not simply evil in and of itself, but rather the Hamiltonian Federalists pursued war as a means to increase personal power at the expense of liberty. Jefferson believed that war served to distract the people from domestic issues, and it invariably led to higher taxes. Standing armies and navies, because they made the decision to go to war easier, were likewise to be avoided or at least viewed with suspicion.

Another cause for grave concern was the New Army, organized and commanded by Alexander Hamilton during the war fever in Adams' administration and used only to quell the abortive Fries' Rebellion. Although Congress disestablished the politicized force following the Convention of 1800 (which ended the Quasi-War), Jefferson and the Republicans could point to the New Army as a prime example of a standing army being used for political

²¹⁸ Lance Banning, *The Jeffersonian Persuasion: Evolution of a Party Ideology*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978; pp. 42-69.

purposes that were destructive of civil liberties. In response to the crisis over the Kentucky and Virginia Resolves, Hamilton is reported to have considered marching the New Army against Virginia.²¹⁹

John Adams had chosen peace with France in 1800, thus splitting the Federalists into the pro- and anti-war factions. When Adams was able to secure the peace, he worked with Congress to halt defense spending and reduce the size of the army. Along with disbanding the New Army, Congress also stopped recruiting for the recently authorized new regiments and ordered those already recruited to be discharged by the summer of 1800. By the time Jefferson took over, the regular army consisted of two cavalry troops, two artillery/engineer regiments, and four regiments of infantry, for a total strength of 3,429.

Jefferson Takes Over

The essence of the argument between Hamiltonian Federalists and Jeffersonian Republicans was the ranking of importance between two potentially opposed objectives: the success of the nation, and the promotion of liberty. Ultimately both parties wanted both, but the High Federalists saw the former as an urgent necessity and the latter as an agreeable, albeit theoretical ideal. Jefferson and his followers, influenced by Bolingbroke, regarded the success of the American nation as a matter of avoiding provocation, while the fostering of civil liberty was a holy and difficult mission, fraught with emergent challenges

²¹⁹ Theodore J. Crackel, *Mr. Jefferson's Army: Political and Social Reform of the Military Establishment, 1801-1809* (New York: New York University Press, 1987), 21; Joseph J. Ellis, *Founding Brothers: the Revolutionary Generation* (New York: Vintage Books, 2000), 194.

from corrupt and bellicose foes. Each side viewed the other as the primary obstacle to success.

In 1957 Samuel P. Huntington characterized the first two centuries of American politics as uniformly liberal. He noted that from the country's founding to the end of World War II there were only two instances of a conservative radicalism—the Federalists of Washington's and Adams' administrations, and the slaveholding Southern aristocracy before the Civil War. While the latter ideology was destroyed in the aftermath of the Civil War, the former was dissolved by the liberal ascendancy after 1800. Huntington went on to note that this American liberalism pursued a military policy that was best described as "hostile, static, and dominant", while the conservative military policy was "sympathetic, constructive, and thwarted."²²⁰

"It is no coincidence that the two statesmen who displayed the most penetrating insight into military policy and the deepest appreciation of the military function were the two great spokesmen of the conservative groups: Alexander Hamilton and John C. Calhoun. They stand in sharp contrast to liberal leaders not just in their views on military policy but in their interest in military affairs. In more than a hundred and fifty years American liberalism never produced a governmental leader with comparable ability and interest in military matters. Hamilton and Calhoun, however, were isolated from the mainstream of American intellectual and political development. Their military policy, like their political philosophy, was never popular with the American people. The avalanche of liberalism brushed them aside into a discredited cranny of history."²²¹

In the context of this bitter ideological rivalry, the issue of public finance was continuously the center of debate. Dumas Malone, despite his adoration of Jefferson, admits that the president's views on modern finance were

²²⁰ Huntington, Samuel P., *Soldier and the State*; Cambridge: The Belknap Press of the Oxford University Press, 1957; pp. 143-62.

anachronistic and flawed. Jefferson viewed the nation's debt as altogether a bad thing, analogous to personal debt. It was, in essence, something to be avoided and done away with; at best it might be a temporary, necessary evil. As regards military strategy, Jefferson believed that freedom from national debt was a prerequisite to a success in war.

“I consider the fortunes of our republic as depending, in an eminent degree, on the extinguishments of the public debt before we engage in any war: because, that done, we shall have revenue enough to improve our country in peace and defend it in war, without recurring either to new taxes or loans.”²²²

That Jefferson could get away with governing for eight years with such a view of financial matters can be attributed in part to the success of American commerce during that period, with the consequent revenues for the government. In such a context, Jefferson was free to despise debt. Hamilton, on the other hand, viewed national debt as analogous to modern corporate debt: a fact of life that was inevitable, beneficial, and the foundation of modern finance.²²³

The difficulty for any Jeffersonian apologist then is that if by all accounts his understanding of finances and economy was flawed, how can one interpret his resulting policies as anything but equally flawed? Jefferson's reduction of the military was aimed above all at economy. If this economy was based on fallacious reasoning, we must *ipso facto* conclude that Hamiltonian Federalists were right in condemning Jefferson's handling of the military.

²²¹ Ibid, 148.

²²² Jefferson to Gallatin, Washington, 11 Oct. 1809, Washington ed. xx, 44.

²²³ Malone, *Jefferson the President: First Term, 1801-1805* (Boston: Little, Brown, & Co., 1970), 105.

In fact, the path to interpretation of Jefferson's administration is much more subtle than that. Hamilton's grasp of finance was more modern, but the policies that flowed from that understanding were potentially dangerous. The fact that public debt could be a unifying influence and the necessary foundation for national credit does not lead to the conclusion that Hamilton's conceptions of a huge military establishment were equally beneficial. His pragmatism and competence in economic matters did not translate into an ethical and even-handed use of the military, as evidenced by his handling of Fries' Rebellion. Hamilton's views about the military, corruption, and individual liberties were a serious danger to the success of the American nation. A Hamiltonian military establishment set loose on the public by a government that would sponsor legislation like the Sedition Act was a heartbeat away from military dictatorship.

Furthermore, although Jefferson's grasp of modern finance was wanting, he himself acknowledged, albeit with regret, that his administration could not undo Hamilton's fiscal system.

"We can pay off his debts in fifteen years, but we can never get rid of his financial system.

"When the government was first established, it was possible to have kept it going on true principles, but the contracted, English, half-lettered ideas of Hamilton destroyed that hope in the bud.

"It mortifies me to be strengthening principles which I deem radically vicious, but this vice is entailed on us by the first error...What is practicable must often control what is pure theory."²²⁴

²²⁴ Jefferson to Gallatin, Washington, 1802, Washington ed., iv, 263.

In fact, far from dismantling the system that he ideologically opposed, Jefferson grew both to understand it and to manipulate it to political advantage. “It is certainly to the public good to keep all the banks competitors for our favours by a judicious distribution of [public funds in deposit] and thus to engage the individuals who belong to them in support of the reformed order of things...”²²⁵

Thus, Jefferson elected not to take on the fiscal system per se, but rather to counteract its innate evil. To do this he had to eliminate the national debt. The thrust of his efforts along these lines would be to simplify the accounting of that debt,²²⁶ and to cut the most offending waste out of government expenditures. From Jefferson’s perspective, the military establishment was the worst offender.

Energizing Jefferson’s initial efforts to reduce the cost of the military was Albert Gallatin, his Secretary of the Treasury. Gallatin believed that it was his primary duty to reduce the national debt—that, indeed, he had been appointed for that very mission.²²⁷ When he took office the national debt stood at \$83,000,000, and Gallatin developed a general program by which the entire debt could be retired by 1817. He sent the president a proposal by which, he claimed, the nation could save hundreds of thousands in the Departments of War and the Navy, as opposed to saving mere thousands elsewhere. Jefferson viewed the existing army of four regiments as, on the one hand, too small to afford any sort of real defense or deterrence against foreign invasion, and on the other hand, too large a burden and threat to an otherwise peaceful nation. Instead, he urged Congress to reform the state militias with a view to making them an effective

²²⁵ Jefferson to Gallatin, 1802, as quoted in Nock, 253.

²²⁶ Albert J. Nock, *Jefferson* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co.), 246.

defense in the event of invasion. As his administration continued, Jefferson privately agreed that militias were no substitute for a regular army.

Jefferson's outlook on the military establishment and the nation's military strategy against the threat of invasion was conditioned by the geopolitical and technological factors of his day. War in the early 19th century was a gradual affair. Blitzkrieg was unheard of, undreamt, and technologically unfeasible. Instead, Jefferson and his advocates conceived of a threat of invasion unfolding at a pace that would allow for the generation of public awareness and resolve to form. This would lead to a voluntary tax on the nation's monies and manpower. Militias would form and "rush" to the scene of the crisis. Reinforcing the coastal defenses that were built (or were being built) around the critical ports, those militias would either defeat the invading forces, or at any rate delay them long enough for the small but effective regular army to arrive and complete the defeat of the enemy. Jefferson's ideal military establishment, then, would be composed of a small, well-trained and equipped regular army, supplemented by state militias.

Despite the political rhetoric, both Federalists and Republicans acknowledged the need for a regular army. Only Elbridge Gerry and a handful of other Republicans wanted to completely abolish the regular army. The Uniform Militia Act of 1792 had created a huge and totally ineffective militia without national regulation or standards—a *de facto* admission that the nation would have to depend upon a regular army.²²⁸

²²⁷ Dumas Malone, *Jefferson and His Times*, Volume IV, 104.

²²⁸ Crackel, *Mr. Jefferson's Army*, 10.

This sentiment was reflected in the landmark piece of legislation sponsored by the administration that resulted in the Military Peace Establishment Act of 1802. Congress reduced and reorganized the army, doing away with two infantry regiments (leaving a total of two). The act also separated the artillery and engineers, creating a regiment for both and assigning the engineers the task of establishing a military academy. Army authorizations were brought down to just under 3300, a 60% reduction of the original authorized strength. This figure, however, reflected a simple rationality: it brought the army's authorized strength in line with its actual recruited strength. Hence, Jefferson's legislation did not significantly reduce army strength.

The Military Peace Establishment Act also provided for the continuation of the rank of brigadier general. This allowed Jefferson to retain the services of James Wilkinson, the sole senior military leader that he felt he could count on to serve the administration's goals. While thus protecting his favorite, Jefferson simultaneously swept away the more questionable members of the General Staff, which was dominated by vociferous and irreconcilable Federalists. Of the seven officers on the general staff, three were discharged within a year. By civilianizing the office of Quartermaster General, Jefferson was able to appoint John Wilkins to the position. Major Thomas Cushing was appointed both Adjutant General and Inspector General despite his Federalist sympathies, and Caleb Swan, the paymaster general, was also retained.²²⁹

²²⁹ Donald Jackson, "Jefferson, Meriwether Lewis, and the Reduction of the United States Army", *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, Vol. 124, No. 2, April, 1980, pp. 95-96.

With regard to the officer corps, Jefferson did have concerns about the total dominance of Federalists within the service. Secretary of War Henry Dearborn called for a thorough purge and told House Speaker Joseph B Varnum: "We have been much more liberal toward them, than they would be towards us, and in future I think we ought to give them measure for measure."²³⁰ Elbridge Gerry reflected the sense of Republican paranoia of that time by warning Jefferson to have loyal troops guard the key fortresses, magazines, and arsenals to prevent seizure by the Federalists. Whether Jefferson was equally worried is unclear, but he was determined to make certain that the army would respond to its new master. To ameliorate the situation, he removed eighty-eight officer slots and simultaneously added twenty new authorizations for ensigns, thus removing a total of sixty-eight authorizations. Much has been made of what some describe as a sort of purging of Federalist officers from the army. Historians have argued over the extent of the purge. Theodore J. Crackel insists that Jefferson brought about a social and political reformation of the army, while William B. Skelton rejects the notion and suggests a more balanced program of modernization.²³¹ The facts of the so-called purge do indeed reveal a fairly moderate program.

Donald Jackson published an article in 1979 in which he described the process by which Jefferson removed serving officers.²³² The new president was given a roster of all serving officers, with each name annotated with a series of codes describing the officers political affiliation (if any) and his military

²³⁰ Ibid, 96.

²³¹ Crackel, *Mr. Jefferson's Army*, 14; Skelton, *An American Profession of Arms*, 25.

²³² Jackson, Donald, "Jefferson, Meriwether Lewis, and the Reduction of the United States Army", *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, Vol. 124, No. 2, April, 1980.

competence. Jackson's article revealed that the previously unknown staff officer who provided the evaluations was Meriwether Lewis. Jefferson had known Lewis for years and hired him as his personal secretary in 1801. Lewis had served in the militia during the Whiskey Rebellion of 1794 and eventually joined the regular army. He spent some time in Knox's Legionary Army and then transferred into the First Regiment in 1796. Serving as a staff officer thereafter, Lewis had the opportunity to travel widely and had come to know most of the army officers then serving by the time he became Jefferson's aide.

Jackson shows that in the process by which Jefferson trimmed down the officer corps, military competence was of greater import than political persuasion. Of the 131 officers retained in service by June 1, 1802, eight were Republican, twenty-five were Federalist, and the others were either nonpolitical or of unknown affiliation. Jackson concludes:

"It is clear that in the winnowing process, military qualifications were given greater consideration than party preference. There are, however, two ways to state this conclusion. We can say that Jefferson and his advisers followed the practice of ignoring party preference, selecting the officers to be retained on the basis of military proficiency. It may be more realistic to phrase the conclusion in a different way: no matter how much Jefferson might have wished for an army heavily weighted with Republicans, there was no way that he could have it in the early years of his administration."²³³

Whichever interpretation is correct, it is clear that no purge of Federalists occurred. Instead, the army was reduced by a small margin in an even-handed way. There were other ways, however, in which Jefferson began to shape the army according to his desires. With Dearborn supervising, the army began to

recruit more from the countryside instead of from northeastern cities.²³⁴ Training programs began to favor the use of light rifle infantry, flying artillery, and skirmishers. Although American doctrinal innovation tended to trail Europe by a generation, the writings of Jacques Antoine Hippolyte, Comte de Guibert²³⁵ (1743-1790) began to influence the officer corps at this time.

The army began to look different as well. In place of queues and powder, army officers were commanded to have cropped hair, and to replace buckles and breeches with trousers. Wilkinson came into sharp conflict with one of his regimental commanders, Colonel Thomas Butler, over this issue. Butler refused to remove his queue and was court-martialed twice but died before punishment could be carried out. So proud of his queue was this officer that he had himself buried in a coffin with his queue protruding through a hole in the bottom.²³⁶

When Butler died Jefferson and Dearborn wanted to fill the empty command slot with a Republican and anti-Wilkinson man in order to balance the commanding general's power within the army. Instead they had to accept the promotion of Colonel Thomas Cushing, and Cushing's spot was filled with Richard Sparks (another Wilkinson man) at the insistence of the Senate.

Jefferson reluctantly relented.²³⁷

²³³ Ibid, 95.

²³⁴ Crackel, *Mr. Jefferson's Army*, 94.

²³⁵ Guibert published his influential *Essai general de tactique* in 1770. In it he predicted that standing professional armies would soon be overtaken by mass armies motivated by intense nationalism.

²³⁶ Crackel, *Mr. Jefferson's Army*, 97.

²³⁷ Crackel, *Mr. Jefferson's Army*, 121-22.

Despite Jefferson's desires it was difficult to significantly reform the professional culture of the army—or rather, the lack thereof. William B. Skelton observes:

“[T]he nation came to accept a small regular army as a permanent feature of the emerging federal system. Nevertheless, the social and political environment obstructed the professional consolidation of the officer corps. The army fluctuated in size and organization because of popular distrust of military power and the generally unsettled nature of national administration. Relatively few officers made a long-term commitment to military service, and military leaders failed to develop effective procedures to instill group values, build internal cohesion, or develop and transmit professional knowledge. Thus, the dominant characteristics of the officer corps were administrative instability, dissension, and a high rate of turnover. The line between the military and civilian spheres remained vague, as expansions of the army brought civilian leaders directly into high command positions and officers of all ranks engaged in a range of political and quasi-political activities. Although reformers sporadically attempted to rationalize military procedures and develop professional standards of conduct, their efforts made little impact on the bulk of the officers.”²³⁸

Jefferson's army was, for the most part, a peace time military institution. His administration began at the same time that Britain and France achieved a temporary peace, so it appeared for a brief time that the international threat might lessen. The war with Tripoli (1801-05) was a purely naval affair, and there were no major Indian campaigns to worry about, either. The threat of war with Spain was, until 1807, the greatest land threat.

Jefferson and West Point

²³⁸ William B. Skelton, *An American Profession of Arms: the army officer corps, 1784-1861*; Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1992; p. xv.

The most enduring legacy of Thomas Jefferson's national security policy was the establishment of the United States Military Academy. Founded as part of the Military Peace Establishment Act of 1802, the Academy was to be an extension of the newly commissioned Corps of Engineers. The founding of the school was the culmination of a conflict over constitutionality and military policy that began in 1776, at the beginning of the republic's struggle for independence. The most salient aspect of the debate was that Jefferson, the most vociferous opponent of a military academy—ostensibly on the grounds of his strict constructionism—became the father of it during his administration. The purpose of this chapter is to trace the development of Jefferson's national security policy as it pertains to the Academy and to determine how the academy fit into Jefferson's overall strategy.

In the early days of the Revolution, John Adams approached Henry Knox and solicited his opinion concerning the need for a military academy. Knox was strongly in favor of the idea, as a remedy to the “unmeaning puppies for officers” found in the Continental Army.²³⁹ He proposed the need for a military academy, expressing the commonly held belief that in order to compete with European invaders, the new republic would have to develop a professional army.

“We ought to have academies, in which the whole theory of the art of war should be taught, and every encouragement possible be given to draw persons into the army that may give lustre to our arms. As the army now stands, it is merely a receptacle for ragamuffins.”²⁴⁰

Shortly thereafter, Knox formally recommended to a Congressional Committee:

²³⁹ Theodore J. Crackel, *West Point: a bicentennial history*; Lawrence (KS: Kansas University Press, 2002), 36.

“...an Academy be established on a liberal plan...where the whole theory and practice of fortifications and gunnery should be taught, to be nearly on the same plan as Woolwich, making an allowance for the difference of circumstances.”²⁴¹

In 1778, Florberque de la Rocatelle, a French volunteer with the Continental Army, advised Washington to establish a school of military art where a regiment of artillerists, engineers, bombardiers and cannoners should be stationed.²⁴² Nevertheless, the Revolutionary War would end with no military academy established. The ineffectual Continental Congress would not move on the issue, and the nation’s leaders were distracted by the immediate problem of war.

Concurrent with the nascent idea of establishing an academy, West Point itself became a key strategic point along the Hudson River valley. As the war progressed, the site was fortified and considered a high priority for defense. Washington gave priority to building and improving the ring of forts that protected West Point. After the fall of Forts Montgomery and Clinton, Brigadier Louis Lebegue Duportail sought to strengthen the position and sent Colonel Thaddeus Kosciusko to work on the project. By mid-1778, Forts Arnold, Wyllys, Webb, and Putnam were begun, and the guns captured from Burgoyne after the surrender at Saratoga were posted on the walls. A chain was extended across the Hudson to interdict enemy river traffic. In addition to fortifying a key waterway, West Point also became home to a small number of invalided soldiers.

After Benedict Arnold’s abortive attempt to put West Point into British hands (1780), the focus of the war moved south, and West Point languished from

²⁴⁰ Knox to W. Knox, 23 Sept 1776, Noah Brooks, *Henry Knox*, 71.

²⁴¹ Knox to CC, Sept 27, 1776, *the Centennial*, 202

²⁴² *The Centennial*, 208.

inattention. As the war ended, Washington, Knox, and Hamilton all believed that the post should be maintained as the most defensible point on the Hudson. Final resolution of the matter had to await a change of constitution, but in 1790 Congress finally purchased West Point for just over \$11,000.

With the war ending in 1783, Congress pondered the question of how to structure the nation's military establishment. In response to inquiries from Washington and Congress, Steuben advocated the establishment of an academy and a "manufactory" for military supplies, both of which were to be operated under a director general. He recommended a student population of 120 officer cadets, who would be required to be over fourteen years old and would pay the government three hundred dollars for tuition. High salaried professors would instruct in natural philosophy, eloquence, belle lettres, civil/international law, history, geography, math, civil architecture, drawing, French, horsemanship, fencing, dancing, and music. There was to be additional instruction for cadets headed for the artillery and engineers.²⁴³

Under Secretary of War Knox and his successor, Timothy Pickering, West Point was continually used as a training base. In 1794, following the formal creation of the Corps of Artillerists and Engineers, West Point became the center for training. Pickering employed foreign officers to train the cadets there, because resident expertise in the scientific aspects of war was not to be had among American officers. Although this practice was continued under Pickering's successor, James McHenry, the training was generally ineffective, because the American officer cadets rankled under the leadership of foreigners.

Despite Washington's sentiments, those of his senior officers, and desultory attempts to start an academy of sorts, there had still been no decisive legislative action to establish an academy by the 1790s. Following Harmar's and St. Clair's humiliating defeats at the hands of the Indians, Washington convened his cabinet in 1793 and surfaced again the question of an academy. The general feeling of those in favor of it was that it was the scientific aspects of warfare—in particular the artillery and the engineers—that most required the formalized training found only in an academy. Although the proposal seems, in retrospect, to be a fairly reasonable one, the political conflict between Hamiltonians and Jeffersonians had already begun to shape all political decision making. Jefferson found himself opposed to the idea of an academy on constitutional grounds.

It was proposed to recommend the establishment of a Military Academy. I objected that none of the specified powers given by the Constitution to Congress would authorize this. The President [said], though it would be a good thing, he did not wish to bring on anything which might generate heat and ill humor. It was, therefore, referred for further consideration and inquiry. [At the next meeting] I opposed it as unauthorized by the Constitution. Hamilton and Knox approved it without discussion. Edmund Randolph was for it, saying that the words of the Constitution authorizing Congress to lay taxes &c., for the common defence, might comprehend it. The President said he would not choose to recommend anything against the Constitution; but if it was doubtful, he was so impressed with the necessity of this measure, that he would refer it to Congress, and let them decide for themselves whether the Constitution authorized it or not.²⁴⁴

It may thus be said that Jefferson—the future “Father of West Point”—was the most important roadblock to the idea. Rather than engender further party conflict, Washington referred the matter to Congress, who in 1794, established

²⁴³ Jacobs, *The Beginning of the US Army*, 286.

the Corps of Artillerists and Engineers and provided as well for books, supplies, and authorizations for officer cadets. Still, it was late in the Adams administration before any action was taken to actually begin the training and education of officers, and by the time the Federalists left office, there had been virtually no progress at all.

In the last years of the Adams administration, Hamilton resurrected the proposed military academy. Consulting both foreign and domestic military officers, he derived a plan whereby there would be a Fundamental School that all officer cadets would attend for two years. There they would learn mathematics, science, geography, and rudimentary engineering. Afterward, they would attend special schools depending on the branch of service to which they were headed: infantry, cavalry, artillery/engineers, or navy. Working with Secretary McHenry, Hamilton got a bill into committee, but by 1800 the rancor between Federalists and Republicans, as well as the split between Adams and Hamilton, doomed the legislation.²⁴⁵

Samuel Dexter became the last Secretary of War in the Adams administration, and he served from 13 May, 1800 through 31 January, 1801. Determined to act in spite of Congress' hostility, Dexter looked to the authorizations of 1794 and another in 1798 for the authority to establish a school for the artillery and engineers. With Adams' approval, he recruited Captain William A. Barron, a mathematics teacher, and also made overtures to a civilian, Jonathan Williams, a relative of Benjamin Franklin, who was quite knowledgeable

²⁴⁴ Jefferson, November, 1793, *The Anas*; Washington edition, ix, 182.

²⁴⁵ Crackel, *West Point*, 36-40.

concerning military affairs, having recently translated two French military texts into English. But with the defeat of Adams in November, Dexter's efforts languished.

When the Republicans took over in March, 1801, most Federalists believed the opportunity to create a military academy was lost. Instead, the Jefferson administration began signaling within weeks that it was their intent to create the academy. Secretary of War Henry Dearborn offered to Englishman George Baron a teaching position at the new academy and provided him details as to pay and benefits. Dearborn then instructed the commander at West Point to be prepared for a military school to be established there.²⁴⁶

While getting the ball rolling at West Point, Jefferson and Dearborn also supervised the proposed legislation that would become the Military Peace Establishment Act of 1802. In March of that year, the Act authorized a separate Corps of Engineers and assigned them the duty of establishing a military academy. The Congressional action so long sought after by the Federalists became a reality under Jefferson's Republicans instead.

Jefferson and Dearborn chose Jonathan Williams, a merchant and a relative of Benjamin Franklin, to be the new academy's first superintendent. Although Williams was a Federalist, he took pains to assure the new president that his views were moderate and that he was willing to serve. Jefferson viewed Williams favorably because of the latter's experience in Europe and his enthusiasm for science and natural philosophy. With an energy that eluded the Federalist administrations before them, Jefferson and Dearborn put matters in

order quickly with the intent of beginning classes for a new batch of cadets by September, 1801.

One of the most urgent questions concerning Thomas Jefferson's military policy is why he so dramatically reversed his opinion regarding the constitutionality of a military academy. The most obvious factor that influenced Jefferson's earlier negative position was his growing fear of Hamiltonian Federalism and its possible use of the military establishment against civil liberties. Hand in hand with this motivation was Jefferson's concern for frugality and avoidance of debt.

Prominent historians have long explained Jefferson's reversal on his desire to introduce science and engineering education to the army and to the nation at large. A devoted student of science himself, Jefferson was certainly a child of the Enlightenment and strongly believed in the efficacy—indeed, in the urgency—of scientific education. Thus, his decision to establish a separate Corps of Engineers and to commission them to establish a military academy was thought to be an expression of this passion. Henry Adams' brief comment on the establishment of West Point reflected this idea:

“Great as the influence of this new establishment was upon the army, its bearing on the general education of the people was still greater, for the government thus assumed the charge of introducing the first systematic study of science in the United States.”²⁴⁷

Stephen Ambrose stresses that Jefferson had, since the 1770s, desired a national university for the teaching of law, chemistry, modern languages, and

²⁴⁶ Crackel, *West Point*, 44.

²⁴⁷ Henry Adams, *History of the United States, 1801-1809*. (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, Inc., 1986), 205.

natural history. Unsuccessful in 1779 in replacing the instruction in the classics with more relevant subjects, he nevertheless joined with Washington, Adams, and many others in advocating reform. Jefferson saw a national university as a means to overcome sectionalism and desired to foster national unity based not upon the classes and prejudices of *l'ancien regime*, but rather upon science and education.

“When Jefferson assumed the Presidency in 1801, he was eager to found a national institution that would eliminate the classics, add the sciences, and produce graduates who would use their knowledge for the benefit of society. Within this framework, Jefferson realized that a military academy had the best chance of success.”²⁴⁸

There is some evidence that would point to this conclusion. America’s colleges, patterned on English universities, were designed primarily to produce lawyers and ministers. They favored the teaching of ancient languages, religion, and other liberal arts, rather than science. But the reality of the new republic was that the education system was vitally connected to the growth and development of the nation, and scholars in Latin and Greek were not likely to be in as high demand as engineers. Ambrose points to four trends in the evolving American philosophy of education:

“From the Renaissance there remained the ideal of education as a means of producing scholar-gentlemen; from the Reformation, the belief that education was a means of moral, ethical, and religious development; from the American Enlightenment, the notion that education was the business of the state, to be used to produce civil leaders; from the scientific revolution, the utilitarian idea of using education to master the physical world for man’s progress therein.”²⁴⁹

²⁴⁸ Stephen Ambrose, *Duty, Honor, Country: a History of West Point*. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1966), 18.

²⁴⁹ Ambrose, 16-17.

Years after he left office, Jefferson, writing to John Adams, made clear where his priorities for education lay:

“When sobered by experience, I hope our successors will turn their attention to the advantages of education. I mean of education on the broad scale, and not that of the petty academies, as they call themselves, which are started up in every neighborhood, and where one or two men, possessing Latin and sometimes Greek, a knowledge of the globes, and the first six books of Euclid, imagine and communicate this as the sum of science. They commit their pupils to the theatre of the world, with just taste enough of learning to be alienated from industrious pursuits, and not enough to do service in the ranks of science...I hope the necessity will at length be seen of establishing institutions here, as in Europe, where every branch of science useful at this day, may be taught in its highest degree.”²⁵⁰

Others point to the simple fact that as president, Jefferson realized that the responsibility for a competent military force had fallen on him, and he established West Point to address the lack of military competence.

“Although he was a prolific writer, Jefferson left no precise explanation as to why he reversed himself, and the reasons are probably as multifaceted as the man. While not a soldier himself, Jefferson clearly saw the country’s present and future need for officers proficient in the military sciences, even if the immediate danger of war with France had passed.”²⁵¹

Once Jefferson became the nation’s chief executive, the ideological passions of the past began to inform his military policy less than the weight of responsibility that he now had for the nation’s security. When writing to James

²⁵⁰ Jefferson to Adams, Washington ed. vi, 356, Monticello, July, 1814.

²⁵¹ John Grant, et al., *West Point: the first 200 years* (Guilford, CN: The Globe Pequot Press, 2002), 16.

Monroe in 1813, he urged that “We must make military instruction a regular part of collegiate education. We can never be safe till this is done.”²⁵²

Norman T. Remick, in his book *West Point: character, leadership, education*, claims that Jefferson founded West Point because by the time he was president he realized the need for a standing army and needed some way to ensure that army would not be a threat to democracy. Hence, he founded West Point specifically to educate the future leadership of the army in character and virtue.²⁵³

Theodore J. Crackel makes the best argument along these lines. Crackel refutes the notion that Jefferson’s main intent was to establish a school for science and engineering. He correctly points out that West Point was neither. The curriculum throughout Jefferson’s administration contained the most rudimentary math and science, and the closest it came to engineering was instruction in drawing. Instead, Jefferson founded West Point as a part of his overall plan to reform the army and ensure its loyalty. With the power to appoint cadets he would be able to increase the population of Republicans and further dilute the Federalist influence in the army.²⁵⁴

Regardless of what Jefferson’s motivations may have been, the Academy fell far short of expectations during its first decade of existence. With Jonathan Williams as the first superintendent (temporarily replaced by Colonel Decius Wadsworth from summer, 1803 through winter, 1805) the Academy remained

²⁵² Jefferson to Monroe, Washington ed. vi, 131, Monticello, 1813.

²⁵³ Norman T. Remick, *West Point: character, leadership, education*. New Jersey: RPR, 2002; pp. 336-374.

²⁵⁴ Crackel, *West Point*, 46-51.

small. Under-funded and physically removed from the national government, it languished on the verge of extermination. Something less than fifty cadets attended as classes began, and the entire Corps of Engineers consisted of seven commissioned officers whose duties included not only running the Academy, but also inspecting and supervising fortifications all along the eastern seaboard. Cadets ranged in age from teens through middle-age, and discipline among the other regular army soldiers at West Point was virtually nonexistent.

Whatever motives may have contributed to Jefferson's decision to found the Academy, none were satisfied with results in his lifetime. West Point's failure to contribute to the development of American scientific education was matched by its lack of impact on the army's efficiency. It had no appreciable effect on the nation's performance in the War of 1812, and it was not until after 1815 that substantial improvements in discipline, funding, and curricula would take begin. But if the Academy fell short of expectations in Jefferson's lifetime, it certainly had a significant impact on the course of American history thereafter.

Each of the theories advanced to explain how West Point figured into Jefferson's policies have merit, but even more so when combined. Jefferson was a complex man, and his reasons for breaking with his own party's past positions on a military academy were likewise multi-faceted. He was certainly a believer in progressive education. It is equally clear that he was seriously determined to change the leadership culture of the military away from its Hamiltonian roots. Finally, as he took the reins of government, Jefferson acquired a new sense of

responsibility to make the nation secure against military threats. It was the combination of these factors that led him to establish on the heights overlooking the Hudson Valley a uniquely American military institution.

Jefferson and the Navy

The most conspicuous mistake of the Jefferson administration in the realm of military policy was the creation of a navy that was composed of a disproportionate amount of gunboats in lieu of a more conventional, sea-going navy of frigates, sloops, and schooners.²⁵⁵ The gunboat navy was singularly ineffective during the subsequent War of 1812, and Jefferson's decision, in retrospect, seems to reveal a startling ineptitude in public policy. Federalists and navalists roundly condemned the president for disestablishing the navy at a critical time in the nation's history, and their criticism lives on today, spilling from the pens of Jefferson's modern critics. Indeed, it is difficult to look at Jefferson's gunboat navy without a sense of disbelief: the president was wagering the nation's defense on what can only be judged an absurd theory—that gunboats, in conjunction with coastal defenses, could stave off European frigates and ships-of-the-line.

²⁵⁵ As a reminder to readers who lack a naval background, the following ship types are defined. Ship-of-the-line: a battleship normally of 74 guns; frigate: a fast medium size ship capable of chasing merchant shipping, normally 36 to 44 guns; schooner: two or three masted ship; brig: two-masted square-rigged ship; corvette, sloop: small warships with a single gun deck and 10 to 18 guns.

As is often the case in history, however, the truth is a bit more complex than Federalist rhetoric or Mahanian condemnation would have it.²⁵⁶ The purpose of this section is to examine Jefferson's naval policy, how it was affected by Congressional action, and what feasible alternatives were available to the president.

The Confederation government sold the Continental Navy's last ship in 1785—precisely the same year that Algiers began preying upon American merchant shipping in an effort to squeeze more tribute from the United States. Little could be done as the new nation struggled to rewrite and ratify its constitution and then get on with the business of learning how to translate the words into practical government. It was not until 1793 that President Washington finally reported to Congress that with the utter failure of diplomacy to solve the problem with Algiers, the nation needed a navy to compel peace. Congress accordingly passed a bill over the objections of anti-nationalists authorizing four 44-gun and two 36-gun frigates (*United States, Constitution, President, Chesapeake, Constellation, and Congress*). The opposition against this measure ranged from those who thought the proposed force too small (and thus a waste of resources) to those who feared that a sea-going navy would provoke war with European powers. Most opposed to the bill recommended that, like Europe, the United States continue paying whatever tribute was necessary to maintain peace with the Barbary powers. The authorization was passed only with the proviso

²⁵⁶ Alfred Thayer Mahan was the most influential American naval proponent and author of *The Influence of Sea Power on History*. His is one of the strongest voices condemning Jefferson's gunboat policy.

that construction of the six new ships would cease if peace with Algiers were attained.²⁵⁷

Construction proceeded slowly, and none of the six ships was completed by the time a peace treaty was ratified on March 2, 1796. Anticipating the peace and constrained for resources, Congress, a year earlier, had authorized the completion of two forty-fours (*United States, Constitution*) and one thirty-six (*Constellation*) and had redirected funds to facilitate the work.²⁵⁸

Federalist ambitions regarding a navy were shaped, of course, by Alexander Hamilton's vision for America. With a huge merchant marine—the second largest in the world²⁵⁹—there was a perceived need for a navy to protect it, at least among northeastern Federalists and the tidewater South. Although the agrarian interior of the country saw no need for a navy, the Federalists argued that building and maintaining a navy would be a unifying influence and would benefit the whole country by drawing men and materials from every region. Hamilton's strategic calculations transcended mere defense of shipping lanes, however. He realized that the young republic lacked the resources to build a navy that could compete ship for ship with England or France, but he reasoned that a small American fleet could “become the arbiter of Europe in America, and be able to incline the balance European competitions in this part of the world as

²⁵⁷ *Annals of the Third Congress* (Washington, 1794), 479-496.

²⁵⁸ K. Jack Bauer, “Naval Shipbuilding Programs 1794-1860”, *Military Affairs*, Vol. 29, Issue 1 (Spring, 1965), 30.

²⁵⁹ Frederick C. Leiner, “The ‘Whimsical, Phylosophic President’ and His Gunboats”, *The American Neptune*, Vol. 43, 1983, p. 245.

our interests may dictate.” Specifically, he saw the utility of a fleet-in-being that could threaten European commerce and bases in the West Indies.²⁶⁰

Nevertheless the Federalists were unable to realize their ambitions until the Adams administration and the turmoil with France. The XYZ Affair stimulated Congress to action, and on March 27, 1798, Adams signed into law an act that directed the completion of the three frigates. The following month Congress followed up with an additional authorization for twelve more vessels of twenty-two guns or less. They also created the Navy Department, relieving the War Department of the burden of administering a navy.

By May, 1798, war fever ran high but resources were few. Congress authorized the seizure of French war vessels and the president to acquire twelve more vessels as either gifts or loans. Adams was also permitted to issue six percent bonds to fund the project. By the end of the summer, Congress had also voted to appropriate \$600,000 to build three more frigates. Secretary of the Navy Benjamin Stoddert instead used the money to complete the three frigates under construction. In 1799, at the prompting of Stoddert, Congress appropriated \$1,000,000 for six seventy-four gun ships-of-the-line and six sloops. In the event, none of the contemplated vessels were built due to the change of administrations. All this was anathema to Jefferson, who abhorred both the unnecessary war with France and its accompanying debt.²⁶¹

²⁶⁰ Allan R. Millett, and Peter Maslowski, *For the Common Defense: a military history of the United States of America* (New York: The Free Press, 1984), 95.

²⁶¹ Jefferson to Madison, Philadelphia, 26 Apr 1798; *Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, Andrew Lipscomb, ed. (Washington DC: The Thomas Jefferson Memorial Association, 1903), 32.

The “revolution of 1800” and the near simultaneous peace with France doomed the Hamiltonian vision for the navy. Jefferson saw his election as the opportunity to eliminate the deficit spending of the Federalist era and retire the national debt as quickly as possible: “The maxim of buying nothing without the money in our pockets to pay for it, would make of our country one of the happiest on earth.”²⁶² At the same time he moved to eliminate internal taxes, thus requiring his administration to curb spending and do away with excess wherever it could be found. Of the discretionary spending available for review, the military in general and the navy in particular was the most significant.²⁶³

By act of Congress in March, 1801, Jefferson was given the discretion to sell most of the ships recently acquired, while retaining some. The new president used this power to rid the navy of all but the *United States* (44), *Constitution* (44), *President* (44), *Chesapeake* (36), *Philadelphia* (36), *New York* (36), *Constellation* (36), *Congress* (36), *Essex* (32), *Boston* (28), *John Adams* (28), *Adams* (28), *General Greene* (28), and the schooner *Enterprise*. He suspended the construction of the seventy-fours, and he announced his intention to drydock most of the retained ships.

The war with Tripoli modified Jefferson’s naval program by forcing him to retain enough ships to fight the war and by pointing to the need for smaller ships, including gunboats, that could ply the coastal waters of the Mediterranean

²⁶² Jefferson to A. Donald, Paris, 1787, Washington ed., ii, 193.

²⁶³ Dumas Malone, *Jefferson and His Time: Jefferson the President, the First Term, 1801-1805*. Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1970; p 102-103. See also Gene A. Smith, *For Purposes of Defense: the politics of the Jeffersonian Gunboat Program* (Newark, NJ: University of Delaware Press, 1995), 11.

powers to intercept small craft. In February, 1803, Congress authorized four 16-gun ships (two brigs, two schooners) and fifteen gunboats. The following year they authorized two more small ships—sloops *Wasp* and *Hornet*—and allowed the administration to borrow or rent additional gunboats from Mediterranean ports.²⁶⁴

With the Tripolitan War over in 1805 and the new struggle between France and her enemies not yet manifesting a renewed threat to the United States, Jefferson moved to implement a cost-cutting naval program built on the defense of ports. Instead of relying principally upon a sea-going navy to deter, intercept, and neutralize enemy depredations, the new plan was built around the gunboat. Gunboats were small craft—50 to 70 feet in length--designed primarily for coastal and inland waters that carried from one to several guns. Simple vessels in design, they required much smaller crews than a man-of-war, and according to Jefferson's model, they could be crewed by militia and merchant marines rather than by professional navy personnel. Best of all, they averaged in cost a mere \$10,000 per boat, so that twenty or thirty could be built for the price of a single frigate. In March, 1805 Congress enacted authorization for 25 gunboats for coastal protection. The following spring saw 50 more gunboats authorized, followed by another 188 in December, 1806. In all Jefferson intended to construct 256 of these small craft, but only 176 were ever built.

In February, 1807 Jefferson communicated his "Special Message on Gun-Boats" to Congress. He defended the policy of relying on gunboats and

²⁶⁴ Bauer, "Naval Shipbuilding Programs 1794-1860", 32.

described a system of coastal defense built upon 1) land batteries employing heavy cannon and mortars; 2) movable artillery to cover points not defended by batteries; 3) floating batteries; and 4) gunboats working in coordination with batteries. In his message Jefferson insisted he had support for the gunboat policy for which “professional men were consulted as far as we had opportunity.” He specifically cited Generals Wilkinson and Gates, along with Commodore Barron and Captain Tingey, and he claimed that “no difference of judgement appeared on the subjects.”²⁶⁵

It is difficult to imagine that such a radical shift in naval policy could have produced such unanimity as Jefferson claimed. But if his account of this happy concord is less than forthcoming, his remaining arguments in favor of gunboats leave even more to be desired. He pointed out that the nation had used galleys—a sort of forerunner of the gunboat—with great success, and from this he inferred the efficacy of relying on the new concept. His logic is dubious. No one doubted that smaller craft were useful on rivers and as a supplement to larger ships along the coast. But to infer from this that gunboats *en masse* could substitute for a sea-going navy was a huge leap—one ultimately shown to be fallacious. Jefferson bolstered this argument by pointing out that the gunboat was “in use with every modern maritime nation for the purpose of defence.” Again, this point would not have been in dispute, but to build upon it his gunboat strategy was a classic *non sequitur*.²⁶⁶

²⁶⁵ Jefferson, “Special Message on Gun-Boats”, Feb 10, 1807; 23 July 2005, <http://www.lexrex.com/enlightened/writings/jefferson/gunboats.htm>.

²⁶⁶ Alfred Thayer Mahan, *War of 1812*, 1: 296.

The most egregious error in Jefferson's special message, however, and one that historians have for the most part allowed him to get away with, was his reference to a recent naval campaign in the Liman firth in the Black Sea.

"The remarkable action between the Russian flotilla of gun-boats and galleys, and a Turkish fleet of ships-of-the-line and frigates, in the Liman sea, 1788, will be readily recollected. The latter, commanded by their most celebrated admiral, were completely defeated, and several of their ships-of-the-line destroyed."²⁶⁷

The reference is to an engagement that occurred in the spring of 1788 during the Russo-Austrian-Turkish War. In a joint land and sea campaign, the Turks were attempting to defend the key fortress of Ochakov on the Black Sea coast from Potemkin's attack. On June 17-18, Kapudan Pasha Hassan, the Turkish admiral, sailed into the shallow Liman firth. Opposing him were two Russian squadrons: a rowing squadron under Prince Karl Nassau-Ziegen, and a sailing fleet under the joint command of Brigadier Panaiothos Alexiano and Rear Admiral John Paul Jones, the American hero, recently hired by Catherine to fight the Turks. The Russian fleet was composed of 58 vessels with 400 guns, while the Turks had twice that number. Jones' squadron boasted only one frigate and one large warship, while Hassan Pasha had ten ships-of-the-line. The Russians maneuvered carefully throughout the day-long battle and eventually set fire to the Turkish flagship. The Turks withdrew and attempted to escape the firth under cover of darkness, having lost only a few ships during the naval battle. But through the genius of Alexander Suvorov—one of Russia's most brilliant and eccentric soldiers—the Russians had emplaced a battery commanding the

²⁶⁷ Jefferson, "Special Message on Gun-Boats", Feb 10, 1807; 23 July 2005, <http://www.lexrex.com/enlightened/writings/jefferson/gunboats.htm>.

escape route and proceeded to hammer the Turkish fleet. The rowing fleet, consisting of mostly galleys, attacked the beleaguered Turks at the same time, and by the time Hassan Pasha's survivors limped out to sea, they had lost five frigates and three ships-of-the-line. Russian losses amounted to one floating battery.²⁶⁸

Jefferson's conclusions from this battle were not justified. A full history of the naval clashes during the war between the Russians and Turks does not point to the superiority of gunboats over traditional warships. Rather, it shows a more balanced lesson: that men-of-war can work effectively with gunboats in coastal waters. Gunboats served throughout that conflict as an effective supplement to the ships-of-the-line, frigates, and sloops on either side, but they certainly did not supplant them. Further, the remarkable Russian success in the Liman firth was brought about by equally remarkable circumstances that preclude any general inferences. The waters of the firth were dominated by the battery at the Kinburn spit, and Suvorov—the army commander—was skilled enough to plan for the entrapment of the Turkish fleet. The firth itself is shallow and puts larger ships at a disadvantage to smaller, more maneuverable craft, but such a condition does not necessarily pertain to other battles and cannot be relied upon for a system of maritime defense. Jefferson's misuse of history to prove his point shows a conspicuous bias in his reasoning.

Hand-in-hand with his fascination with gunboats was Jefferson's belief that the fleet could be manned by naval militia, in lieu of professional navy sailors. In December, 1804 he penned a bill designed to establish a naval militia composed

²⁶⁸ "History of the Russian Navy—The Black Sea Fleet", 23 July 2005, <http://www.navy.ru/history/>

of all sea-faring men aged 18-45 who would then be mobilized in an emergency.²⁶⁹ Jefferson and his Republican allies in Congress believed that such a militia would easily produce the numbers of skilled seamen needed to man the gunboats when required. In the event, the theory proved groundless. In 1807, pursuant to the *Chesapeake* incident, a British squadron anchored in Hampton Roads and threatened the city of Norfolk, whose mayor had refused their request for fresh water. Captain Stephen Decatur attempted to deploy the sixteen gunboats available, but to his chagrin, he could not muster enough men to do the job. As the weeks dragged on and war fever ebbed, so also did the men's interest in serving and crewing the gunboats. In the only serious test of Jefferson's naval militia theory, it had conspicuously failed, although Jefferson did not acknowledge it and continued to pursue his scheme.²⁷⁰

Jefferson's detractors have not been shy in criticizing the gunboat program: "Only once in American history has a president deliberately opted to weaken the navy in the midst of an international war that threatened to engulf his country."²⁷¹ Alfred Thayer Mahan, writing at the time that America was about to launch into great power status, roundly condemned Jefferson's naval policy because it did not include large, sea-going battleships. For any power that intends to compete in the world against great powers, such a force is the *sine*

²⁶⁹ See Jefferson to John Jay, Paris, 1787, Washington ed., ii, 91 for his early thoughts on naval militia; and Jefferson to Robert Smith, Washington, Oct 1805, Ford ed., viii, 381 for his legislative plan.

²⁷⁰ John Brannan ed., *Official Letters of the Military and Naval Officers of the United States* (Washington: Way and Gideon, 1823), 167-68.

²⁷¹ Frederick C. Leiner, "The 'Whimsical, Phylosophic President' and His Gunboats", *The American Neptune*, Vol. 43, 245.

qua non of both military and economic power.²⁷² The point that eludes Mahan, as it did Jefferson's other detractors, including Harold and Margaret Sprout, is that early 19th century America was *not* and could not be a great power. With a small, rural population, virtually no infrastructure, and an economy that was just getting ready to expand, the young republic had no hope of competing with European powers for dominance or even parity on the seas. Anti-Jefferson historians conclude that the country was weak during his presidency because of the lack of a navy. The reverse is actually the case: Jefferson chose not to have a navy because the country was weak.

The claim that Jefferson was anti-navy requires qualification. The heart of the matter is this: he was not anti-naval in principle. Indeed, it was Jefferson who, as ambassador to France, had argued during the crisis with Algiers that the United States should build a navy and send it against the pirates. His ideology was not averse to warships, but rather was centered on a perceived need to cut the budget. The American navy was expensive, and it was an expense that teetered on controversy—was it necessary? could it provoke war? was it too small and thus a waste of money? By reducing the size of the navy—in part in cooperation with the Federalists following the peace with France—Jefferson and Gallatin were able to reduce the navy's budget from \$3,385,000 in 1800 to \$900,000 in 1802. Still, as Frederick Leiner points out, these savings were in part illusory, because the administration and Congress chose to fund the

²⁷² Mahan, *War of 1812*, 1: 296-298.

Tripolitan War with a special “Mediterranean Fund”, which alone absorbed some \$2,000,000 in 1804.²⁷³

In conjunction with his marginalization of the frigates, Jefferson sponsored a proposal to build a huge dry-dock system in Washington. Benjamin Latrobe prepared plans, but Congress ultimately refused to fund the project. Not only was the concept criticized as ridiculous by Jefferson’s opponents, but building the facility would require the purchase of private lands as well as the removal and relocation of some of the capital’s population.²⁷⁴ Even Gallatin strenuously opposed the concept, and those favorable to the idea urged the president to mitigate the risk by building several smaller facilities. Jefferson nevertheless bulled the proposal forward, where it eventually died in Congressional committee.

The results of the gunboat policy were frustrating and depressing. In 1806, when the HMS *Leander*, attempting to fire a warning shot at an American merchantman near New York City, hit it instead and killed one of the crew, Jefferson was inundated with cries for action. But with two of the three serving frigates deployed to the Mediterranean and the third under repair, and with the vaunted gunboats not yet deployed near New York City, Jefferson was powerless to do anything but lodge a complaint.²⁷⁵

Even Jefferson himself realized that he had miscalculated the efficacy of the gunboat fleet. He considered building a sea-going navy toward the end of his

²⁷³ Act of Mar. 3, 1801 (*Annals*, 6 Congress, 1557-1559); see also Leiner, “The ‘Whimsical, Phylosophic President’ and His Gunboats”, 247.

²⁷⁴ Gene A. Smith, “A Perfect State of Preservation: Jefferson’s Dry Dock Proposal”, *Virginia Cavalcade*, Vol. 39, Num. 1, Summer, 1989, p. 122.

²⁷⁵ Jefferson, *Proclamation*, May 1806, Ford ed., viii, 445.

second term, but nothing ever came of the idea.²⁷⁶ After the British victory at Trafalgar (1805) there was obviously no hope of competing with them, and Congressmen had to wrestle with the fear that the ships they might authorize would be at the mercy of the English.

The lack of a credible sea-going navy led to a crisis following the *Chesapeake* incident (1807), because Jefferson had no credible military options with which to respond to Britain's provocations. With no ships to punish British merchant shipping or to resist her men-of-war, Jefferson resorted to an economic instrument of coercion, the embargo. Although popular at first, the embargo against Great Britain became burdensome to the Federalist northeast and ultimately required Jefferson to deploy federal troops to enforce it in New York and Vermont. Jefferson's critics point out, with some logic, that the disastrous embargo policy emanated from the lack of a navy.

It is a formidable task for an historian to try to defend Jefferson's gunboat policy. Nevertheless it is an easy matter to expose the harsh criticism of Jefferson as unjustified. The attempt to portray Jefferson as a radical anti-navalist or as a "whimsical, philosophic President", as Federalist Senator Plumer called him, lacks objectivity and a genuine appreciation for the facts.²⁷⁷

To begin with, it was not the call for gunboats that is in question, but rather the unwillingness to fund a sea-going navy as well. Gunboats had great utility throughout 18th and 19th century America, and in 1802 there was an urgent need

²⁷⁶ See for example, Jefferson to Jacob Crowninshield, May, 1806, Ford ed., viii, 453.

for shallow draft war vessels that could ascend the Mississippi in response to Spain's provocations.²⁷⁸ Further, as the war with Tripoli continued, the Mediterranean fleet communicated a need for smaller craft to supplement the frigates, because the enemy was hugging the coastline and escaping the larger ships.²⁷⁹

The initial experiments with gunboats were not promising—one being lost with all hands in the middle of the Atlantic, another captured by the British, and yet another blown from its moorings to land in a Georgia cornfield! Critics began referring to gunboats as the “whirligigs of the sage of Monticello” or simply as “Jeffs”. With the outbreak of war in 1805, it became clear to Secretary of the Navy Robert Smith as well as Gallatin that gunboats alone would not suffice to keep the British and French from molesting American shipping. Jefferson apparently agreed, and he reluctantly called for construction of larger warships. The problem, however, was that the Republican Congress would not fund them.²⁸⁰

It is a fair criticism to suggest that had Jefferson been more vociferous in support of a balanced fleet, he may have convinced his fellow Republicans to follow suit and appropriate funds for badly needed frigates and perhaps even ships-of-the-line. But ultimately Congress was responsible for its own failures, and while they continued to buy gunboats, they ignored Jefferson's simultaneous

²⁷⁷ For Jefferson's early support for building a navy, see Jefferson to Monroe, Paris, 1784, Ford ed., iv, 10; and Jefferson to Horatio Gates, Paris, 1784, Ford ed., iv, 24.

²⁷⁸ Leiner, “The ‘Whimsical, Phylosophic President’ and His Gunboats”, 248.

²⁷⁹ *Naval Documents Related to the United States Wars with the Barbary Powers*, vol. 2, (Washington: US Government Printing Office, 1939), 346, 362-366.

²⁸⁰ Smith, *For Purposes of Defense*, 36-57.

proposals for larger ships. In the words of Jeffersonian apologist, Professor Gene A. Smith:

“Even though the nation needed to stress defense, Jefferson knew that the rabidly anti-navy Republican Congresses of the first decade of the nineteenth century did not support the construction of sea-going vessels for that purpose. They instead embraced gunboats as an alternative for defending the country... Thus, the president was forced to reconcile the defense problem in the only way Congress would approve—the gunboat program. What becomes apparent is that Jefferson’s attitude toward the navy has been stereotyped, just as his gunboat program has been erroneously over-simplified.²⁸¹

Gunboats certainly had a role to play both before Jefferson’s administration and after. They were instrumental in the federal government’s attempts to suppress the international slave trade near New Orleans after Jefferson signed the ban into law in 1808. Under the command of David Porter, the craft were used to seize illegal shipments in coastal waters. Ultimately the enterprise was a failure, due in part to the increasing value of the slave trade, but also because Porter consistently failed to find enough sailors to man the craft adequately. As at Norfolk in 1807 the naval militia concept, so attractive in Republican theory, was a failure in practice.²⁸²

During the War of 1812, the “Jeffer’s” went into action to assist in the defense of New Orleans when the British invaded in December, 1814. Integrated into a system of shore defenses, the gunboats did an admirable job delaying the invading flotilla for nine crucial days, thus facilitating Andrew Jackson’s famous victory. Though undermanned and ultimately destroyed or captured by the

²⁸¹ Gene A. Smith, “Floating a Republican Idea: Jefferson’s Gunboats at New Orleans,” *Military History of the West*, Vol. 24, No. 2, Fall, 1994, pp. 91-110.

British, they did come close to performing the function envisioned by Jefferson a decade earlier.²⁸³ Unfortunately, in the actions around Washington DC and elsewhere throughout the war, gunboats proved singularly ineffective.

Despite the Republican Congress' hostility to a navy, there were real strategic reasons for having a small but capable fleet. Alexander Hamilton had made a reasonable argument that a moderately sized sea-going fleet in American waters could threaten European holdings in the West Indies as diplomatic leverage in the conflicts between the Old World and the United States. "A nation, despicable by its weakness," he claimed, "forfeits even the privilege of being neutral." Jefferson, however, argued that the same dynamic could be achieved on land without a navy. American war plans included contingencies against British Canada, French Louisiana, and Spanish Florida, where American militia armies could overwhelm smaller European garrisons—or so it was thought. Jefferson foresaw the need for a small navy, strong enough only to deter European powers whose navies were equally small.

"It will be enough if we enable ourselves to prevent insults from those nations of Europe which are weak on the sea, because circumstances exist, which render even the stronger ones weak as to us...Providence has placed their richest and most defenceless possessions at our door."²⁸⁴

Jefferson's naval views, combined with his pacific tendencies, led him and many others to misinterpret the Battle of Trafalgar. With the catastrophic

²⁸² Gene A. Smith, "US Navy Gunboats and the Slave Trade in Louisiana Waters, 1808-1811," *Military History of the West*, Vol. 23, No. 2, pp. 135-47.

²⁸³ Gene A. Smith, "Floating a Republican Idea: Jefferson's Gunboats at New Orleans," *Military History of the West*, Vol. 24, No. 2, Fall, 1994, pp. 91-110.

destruction of French naval ambitions at the hands of the masterful Nelson, it was clear to many in both Europe and the United States that for the foreseeable future, it would be impossible for any single nation to create a fleet that could face the British in line of battle. For some, including Jefferson and most Republicans, this fact led to the conclusion that the construction of sea-going men-of-war would be a colossal waste of resources. Instead, it should have pointed to a shift in strategy from an emphasis upon ships-of-the-line in favor of a fleet of fast-moving frigates. Just as the French began to wage an effective *guerre de course* by preying on British merchant shipping, so an American navy could have held enemy sea lines of communication at risk in the event of war.²⁸⁵

More important to the debate on naval strategy was the British attack and defeat of the Danish fleet at anchor in Copenhagen. In April, 1801, a British fleet commanded by Horatio Nelson engaged and destroyed the enemy fleet that was anchored under armed fortifications. Without losing a single ship, Nelson destroyed numerous Danish ships and compelled the surrender of the rest. The quick action of the British prevented the Danes from linking up with Russian ships and showed how vulnerable enemy fleets could be to sudden attack from the Royal Navy. It was this threat that was more of a serious challenge to an American sea-going navy than a Trafalgar-like decisive battle. With coastal fortifications that varied from fair (New York) to nonexistent in some ports, the United States had to worry about a sudden British raid destroying ships or

²⁸⁴ Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, quoted in Gene A. Smith, "A Perfect State of Preservation: Jefferson's Dry Dock Proposal", *Virginia Cavalcade*, Vol. 39, Num. 1, Summer, 1989, p. 118.

facilities. Jefferson had the foresight to call for a widespread effort to strengthen the fortifications and guns around critical American ports, but such work would be long and expensive—and ultimately not proof against a determined enemy. Thus, Jefferson had to figure into the strategic equation the chance that an expensive sea-going navy might get ‘Copenhagened’ at the start of a war.²⁸⁶

Naval theorists of the ilk of Alfred Thayer Mahan have focused upon the sea battle and the fleet that wins it as the whole of naval strategy. Mahanian theory came to view the destruction of the enemy’s fleet, a la Trafalgar, as the proper focus of strategy. Once “command of the sea” had been thus attained, the victorious nation could enjoy secure commerce while being able to strangle the shipping lanes of her adversaries at will. This theory, like similar theories emphasizing the decisive land battle, was erroneous. As the brilliant Julian Corbett made clear at the turn of the twentieth century, the sea cannot be “commanded” by winning a battle with ships-of-the-line. Rather, to get at an enemy’s commerce required frigates that could chase merchantmen and disperse along sea lanes, rather than massing for linear battle. Thus, dispensing broadsides in line of battle and interdicting (or protecting) commerce were two opposite pursuits—requiring two different types of ship.²⁸⁷

After Trafalgar, a nation that contemplated future conflict with Great Britain, while perhaps not being able to win big naval battles, could instead opt for a strategy of *guerre de course* by constructing small-to-medium size ships

²⁸⁵ Colin S. Gray, *The Leverage of Sea Power: the Strategic Advantage of Navies in War* (New York: The Free Press, 1992), 12-15.

²⁸⁶ Gray, *The Leverage of Sea Power*, 76.

that could attack merchantmen. By avoiding battle and instead holding enemy shipping at risk, an adversary could wreak economic havoc on England, driving insurance rates up, and distracting the British fleet. Jefferson and the Republicans in Congress would have been well advised to balance their appropriation of gunboats with a modest fleet of frigates that could menace British (or French, or Spanish) trade. It is a matter of record that American-built frigates in the early 19th century were among the best in the world, being slightly longer and faster than European designs, and usually going to sea up-gunned and with large crews. They were thus well designed for single-ship engagements and could normally out-gun adversaries and board them with a surplus of sailors.²⁸⁸

The Republican gunboat policy was a strategic mistake that would cost the nation dearly. But to hold Jefferson solely responsible for the flawed plan is inaccurate for two key reasons. It was first and foremost a Congressional failure—one that was admittedly abetted by Jefferson. Secondly, given the fundamental weakness of early 19th century America, there were few strategic options available to the administration. It is unlikely that even a robust shipbuilding program would have resulted in a fleet capable of defending against British depredations in the War of 1812. It is, however, more to the point that a modest fleet existent in 1807 would have given Jefferson and the country more

²⁸⁷ Julian Corbett, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1911), *passim*.

²⁸⁸ Allan R. Millett and Peter Maslowski, *For the Common Defense: a Military History of the United States of America* (New York: The Free Press, 1984), 106.

policy options than the ineffective embargo to protest against British impressment of American sailors.

In the end analysis, the gunboat navy was a mistake but one that was in some ways unavoidable, given the Republican Congress' aversion to the military establishment left by the Federalists. Although Jefferson was at the helm at the time, there is little any administration could have done to make America strong on the seas prior to the War of 1812. The disasters that the gunboats failures led to were certainly of a smaller scale than what happened to the French at Trafalgar or the Danes at Copenhagen.

CHAPTER FOUR

Jefferson in Command—Threats, Strategy, and Operations 1801-05

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In addition to the broad changes to the national military posture that Thomas Jefferson instituted during his first term, he also supervised three key strategic operations: the war with Tripoli, the nation's Indian policy, and the Louisiana Purchase. Each of these enterprises confronted the president with unique and critically important challenges that would have long-lived and profound ramifications for the American people and the international community. The war with Tripoli was a limited venture that required patience, measured response, and, ultimately, conclusive military operations in a theater of war that defied attempts at decisive action. Because the war was limited in terms of expected benefits to the nation, Jefferson had to balance traditional military concepts of employing overwhelming force with the need to limit expenditures. The Indian problem challenged the president to find a balance between his impulses toward beneficent sympathy for native culture on the one hand, and his countrymen's paranoia concerning a classic clash of civilizations and the dangers of foreign intrigue among the Indians on the other. His solutions have been criticized by historians, most of whom lack a realistic appreciation of the historical

context, and none of whom have suggested reasonable alternatives to Jefferson's policy. Finally, the Louisiana Purchase tested the new president's strategic savvy in geopolitics while simultaneously presenting a singular opportunity for national growth that intruded into the shadowy borderlands of unconstitutionality. Jefferson—honest and introspective regarding the constitutional limits of his office—decided to seize what would become the most biggest opportunity in the history of the United States. An examination of how Jefferson dealt with these three challenges will reveal his depth of strategic insight, the tortured dialectic between his nationalistic impulses and his belief in the limits of power, and his occasional shortfalls in character and leadership.

War With Tripoli

Although the newly elected President Jefferson sought to reduce military expenditures, he became more intolerant of the antics of the Barbary powers. In September, 1800, the American frigate, *George Washington*, arrived in Algiers to deliver tribute to the Dey. Instead of consummating the deal, the Algerian leader demanded that Captain William Bainbridge carry tribute, along with his harem, court officials, and a variety of zoo animals to Constantinople...under the flag of Algeria. Outgunned and outnumbered, Bainbridge had to comply. When his ship returned home the following year, Americans, including the new president, were outraged.²⁸⁹

Tripoli also had threatened war with the United States if it did not receive a promised warship and more annual tribute. Likewise the other Barbary powers

were beginning to rankle for more timely deliveries of tribute from the Americans. In July, 1800, the Bashaw of Tripoli, Yusuf Karamanli, tiring of pestering the American consul, James Cathcart, for more tribute, allowed his corsairs to capture a brig, the *Catherine*, which he stripped of its goods, valued at \$50,000, before letting the ship and crew go free. It was intended as a warning that if the United States did not treat Tripoli with equal respect, vis a vis Algiers and Tunis, that there would be war.²⁹⁰

Three weeks into his administration, the “half-way pacifist” President Thomas Jefferson ordered preparations for an undeclared war against Tripoli. After years of fruitless and frustrating negotiation with the rapacious rulers of the Barbary Coast, and after his country had paid more than a million dollars in bribes, Jefferson had had enough: “Tripoli...had come forward with demands unfounded either in right or in compact...The style of the demand admitted but one answer.”²⁹¹ A country that had thrown off British tyranny would not simply exchange it for another form from the Muslim pirates. In May, 1801, the new president convened his cabinet to discuss the possibility of sending a squadron to the Mediterranean.²⁹²

The two primary issues up for discussion were the constitutionality of prosecuting armed intervention without Congressional approval, and the nature of American operations in the Mediterranean. Secretary of the Navy Samuel Smith made the point that if Tripoli declared war on the United States (an event

²⁸⁹ US Office of Naval Records, *Naval Documents*, vol. 1, 375-436.

²⁹⁰ *Naval Documents*, 420.

²⁹¹ Jefferson, *First Annual Message*, Dec 1801, Washington ed., vii, 7.

that had already happened on May 14, but which was unknown to the government yet), then no Congressional approval was required to defend American interests. Given that assembling Congress would take at least weeks and maybe months, Smith's point seemed reasonable.²⁹³

Smith, Madison, and Gallatin also argued for a rigorous offensive against enemy pirate ships and ports. But Jefferson was inclined to listen to the counsel of his attorney general, Levi Lincoln, who said that the squadron should go no further than protecting American merchant shipping and should not pursue enemy warships. Given the communications gap between the national command authority (the president) and the fleet, such an approach was faulty. At the time of the cabinet meeting, the government was unaware that Tripoli had declared war, nor could the status of the other powers be certain. A more effective directive might have left the character of operations up to the naval commander of the squadron, whose mission would have been to protect American shipping through whatever means necessary. President Jefferson—certainly not alone among American presidents—had intruded into operational matters instead of confining himself to strategic direction.²⁹⁴

In fact the relationship between presidential direction of the war and the individual initiative of the theater commanders would become a major issue—one that would ultimately characterize the conclusion of the conflict. American history since the early 18th century has seen the struggle between president and field

²⁹² Joseph Wheelan, *Jefferson's War: America's First War on Terror 1801-1805* (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 2003), 104-105.

²⁹³ Jefferson Notes on Cabinet Meetings, *The Thomas Jefferson Papers at the Library of Congress*, May-June 1801.

commander evolve from one extreme to the other—from LBJ’s supervision of target lists in Vietnam to FDR’s diplomatic handling of his feuding senior commanders to George W. Bush’s generous delegation of operational decision making to Tommy Franks. The “right” combination is elusive, because over-supervision translates to operational opportunities lost, while too loose a leash can result in field commanders taking liberties with national policy. Jefferson initially chose to restrict the behavior of his squadron commanders fighting Tripolitan piracy, but he ended up with an extremely loose cannon in the person of William Eaton, whose antics were crucial to the winning of the war against Tripoli.

Eaton was a former soldier, having served with distinction under Anthony Wayne, and he was able to secure a post as consul to Tunis during the crisis with Algiers. A voracious reader, adventurer, arabist, and ruffian, Eaton became convinced early in his experience with the Barbary powers that force alone would resolve the issue. “There is but one language which can be held to these people, and this is *terror*. [Congress must] send a force into these seas, at least to check the *insolence* of these scoundrels and to render *themselves* respectable.”²⁹⁵

In any case the president’s proclivity for being overly restrictive toward his squadron commanders was overridden by his Secretary of the Navy. Smith’s directive to the departing fleet gave the commander wide latitude in choosing among blockading, hunting corsairs, or convoy escort. Unfortunately, the first

²⁹⁴ Jefferson, *First Annual Message*, Washington ed., vii, 7.

commodore chose to interpret his orders as narrowly as he could, thus convincing himself that he lacked specific authority to attack Tripoli directly. The squadron, consisting of the frigates *President* (44), *Philadelphia* (36), and *Essex* (32), and the schooner *Enterprise* (12) was commanded by Richard Dale, the administration's second choice after the more aggressive Thomas Truxton, who refused to serve as both squadron commander and captain of the flagship.²⁹⁶

Jefferson elected to delay a formal notification to Congress about the Mediterranean fleet until it was underway. His communication to them, however, revealed the initial uncertainty of his Mediterranean policy.

“The real alternative before us is whether to abandon the Mediterranean or to keep up a cruise in it, perhaps in rotation with other powers who would join us as soon as there is peace. But this Congress must decide.”²⁹⁷

The statement showed Jefferson's enduring devotion to the idea of international cooperation in the suppression of piracy—an idea he embraced as both minister to France and Secretary of State. It also showed his instinctive desire to defer to Congress in the hope, perhaps, that they would assume a decisive stance toward the Barbary powers. The Congress refused to declare war, however, and Jefferson, despite his reputation as a “strict constructionist”, was perfectly willing to fight an undeclared war. Eventually, in February, 1802, Congress authorized “all necessary force” to protect merchant shipping against

²⁹⁵ Glenn Tucker, *Dawn Like Thunder: The Barbary Wars and the Birth of the U.S. Navy* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1963), 115.

²⁹⁶ Wheelan, *Jefferson's War*, 110-111.

²⁹⁷ Jefferson to Wilson Nicholas, Jun 1801, Ford ed., ix, 15 Feb 2006, http://oll.libertyfund.org/Texts/Jefferson0136/Works/Vol09/HTMLs/0054-09_Pt04_1801.html#hd_lf054.9.head.133

the Barbary pirates. The president had the requisite authority to commit Americans to combat, and the war with Tripoli could continue at his discretion.²⁹⁸

Richard Dale, a Revolutionary war hero who had served with distinction aboard the *Bonhomme Richard*, was to prove as cautious as a commodore as he had been reckless as a lieutenant. His cruise began splendidly as the aggressive Lieutenant Andrew Sterett, in command of the *Enterprise*, destroyed the corsair *Tripoli*. Dale then undertook a blockade of Gibraltar and compelled the Tripolitan admiral, Murad Reis (actually a Scotsman-turned-Muslim, Peter Lisle) to abandon his flagship, the *Meshuda* (the previously captured and converted *Betsey*). Despite these tactical successes, in terms of his strategic objective, Dale accomplished little. He had interpreted his orders from Secretary Smith as disallowing any direct attack on Tripoli itself, and he later claimed these instructions hamstrung him. His half-hearted blockade of Tripoli harbor did not impress or seriously impede Yusuf, and Dale himself soon despaired of the war effort.²⁹⁹

Jefferson, upon hearing the news of the *Enterprise* exploit, commented upon the early phase of the war in his annual message to Congress. Although his deference to the legislative body was politick, it also revealed a naïve restraint in the name of constitutionality that served only to weaken and dissipate America's initial efforts to fight the war successfully.

“One of the Tripolitan cruisers...engaged the small schooner *Enterprise*, commanded by Lieutenant Sterret, ...was captured after a heavy slaughter of her men, without the loss of a single one on our part...Unauthorized by the Constitution, without the sanction of

²⁹⁸ *Naval Documents*, vol. 2, 82-124.

²⁹⁹ *Naval Documents*, vol. 1, 440-648.

Congress, to go beyond the line of defence, the vessel being disabled from committing further hostilities, was liberated with its crew.³⁰⁰

In the spring of 1802, Jefferson and Smith, having failed a second time to persuade Truxton to accept the position, assigned Richard Morris as commodore in charge of the squadron sent to relieve the first one. Morris was the brother of a Vermont congressman who had facilitated Jefferson's victory over Burr in the presidential election, so the appointment was clearly a political one. The new commodore sailed with his wife and son aboard the flagship, and the attention he paid to his own comforts far exceeded his zeal in making war. His squadron consisted of the *Constellation* (36), *Chesapeake* (36), *Adams* (28), and two ships already in the Mediterranean, the now famous *Enterprise* (12), and another frigate, the *Boston* (28), which had previously joined Dale's squadron.³⁰¹

Morris spent an entire year plodding through the western Mediterranean, visiting one European port after another and did not make it to a Barbary port until nine months after his arrival at Gibraltar. Under his loose direction a blockade of sorts was imposed upon Tripoli, but since the squadron lacked a sufficient amount of shallow-draft vessels to intercept runners hugging the dangerous waters of the coast, the blockade was wholly ineffective. In fact, it was worse than ineffective, because it actually emboldened the enemy when he saw how little capacity America had for war. With William Eaton back in Washington, filling Jefferson's ear concerning Morris' lethargy, the president

³⁰⁰ Jefferson, *First Annual Message*, Dec. 1801, Washington ed. viii, 7.

³⁰¹ Max Boot, *The Savage Wars of Peace: Small Wars and the Rise of American Power* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 14-15.

directed that a new squadron with a new commander be assigned. Edward Preble took charge as the third commodore in the war effort. Morris was recalled on 16 June, 1803 and subsequently court-martialed and dismissed from the Navy.³⁰²

At the same time that Morris' unhappy command was coming to an end, an encounter between Algiers and Great Britain showed the world what might happen if a Christian power fought back against the Barbary pirates with resolution. When British warships defended against and sank several Algerian corsairs, the dey retaliated by imprisoning every British citizen in Algiers. In response, Lord Horatio Nelson sailed to Algiers with a fleet of seven frigates and systematically pummeled the city, causing fires and destroying buildings. After refusing to negotiate, Nelson finally gave his terms: the immediate release of all British prisoners, a fine, a promise to behave, and compensation to any British citizens who suffered losses during the escapade. The dey agreed, and the British departed.³⁰³

For his part Jefferson's strategic views of the war were solidifying. As he sent Preble to the Mediterranean, he explained his perspective on the problem:

"The war with Tripoli stands on two grounds of fact. 1st. It is made known to us by our agents with the three other Barbary States, that they only wait to see the event of this, to shape their conduct accordingly...2dly. If peace was made, we should still, and shall ever, be obliged to keep a frigate in the Mediterranean to overawe rupture, or we must abandon that market. Our intention in sending Morris with a respectable force, was to try whether peace could be forced by a coercive enterprise on their town. His inexecution of orders baffled that effort. Having broke him, we try the same experiment under a better commander. If, in the course of the

³⁰² Ibid.

³⁰³ Wheelan, *Jefferson's War*, 158.

summer, they cannot produce peace, we shall recall our force, except one frigate and two small vessels, which will keep up a perpetual blockade. “³⁰⁴

Jefferson’s comments illustrate his understanding of what was truly America’s first “domino theory” of enemy behavior. But while the theory might prove dubious when applied to Southeast Asia in the 1960s, it was accurate along the Barbary coast in the early 19th century. The various governments of Morocco, Algiers, Tunis, and Tripoli watched very closely what treaty provisions the Christian powers obtained from each other, and they based their demands for tribute on what they thought the market would bear.

Preble sailed first to Tangiers and secured peace with the emperor of Morocco, who had been threatening war with America over the matter of two ships the Americans had captured. This minor diplomatic victory, however, was soon overshadowed. The first major event of Preble’s command was a catastrophe for Americans and the war effort. Captain William Bainbridge, a well-meaning, courageous and energetic officer who nevertheless suffered a string of unfortunate events in his career, ran his frigate, the *Philadelphia* (44) aground outside of Tripoli harbor, where she was subsequently captured and the crew enslaved. Bainbridge was not even able to scuttle the ship properly, and the bashaw found himself in possession of an intact American frigate. But the disaster led to a daring feat of arms the following February, when Stephen Decatur, Jr. led a boatful of American commandos into Tripoli’s harbor by night and burned the frigate beyond repair, escaping without the loss of a single man.

³⁰⁴ Jefferson to Judge Tyler, Monticello, March, 1805, Washington ed. iv, 574.

The *Philadelphia* thus provided the Americans with a universally celebrated episode of bravery—even attracting the praise of Horatio Nelson—while at the same time the enslaved crew became a central issue in the war.³⁰⁵

In August, 1804, Edward Preble launched his long planned-for assault on Tripoli, destroying several ships, capturing several more, and damaging the city by shelling. In a series of follow-on raids against the city late in the summer, Preble determined to hammer the bashaw hard enough to conclude a peace agreement. But while his exploits would earn Preble the gratitude of the nation, by themselves they served only to harden Yusuf's resolve. In fact it pointed out the obvious: with a secure land-base of operation, the Tripolitans could harass the Americans indefinitely with impunity. Preble, however, was energetic in his prosecution of the blockade, and, armed with gunboats to supplement his fleet, he was successful in capturing and interdicting Tripoli's previously untouched corsairs and runners. To his chagrin in early fall, he received orders to hand over command to the war's fourth commodore, Samuel Barron, who was en route from America with four more frigates.³⁰⁶

By the time Barron took over what was to be an uninspiring command, William Eaton's frustrations had grown to the point that he approached Jefferson with a proposal to support the bashaw's older brother, Hamet, whom the dastardly Yusuf had wrongly deprived of office.³⁰⁷ His ambition was to culminate in the war's most unlikely and probably most effective operation: the seizure of Derna, Tripoli's second largest city, by a handful of Americans and a ragtag

³⁰⁵ Boot, *Savage Wars of Peace*, 3-6.

³⁰⁶ *Ibid*, 17-22.

coalition of mercenaries and Arab cavalry who, for the right price, had rallied behind Hamet. The account of Eaton's expedition in the face of foreign and domestic intrigue against him, few resources, and an unending series of mutinies and desertions, is one of the most remarkable in American history. It is almost a certainty that the over 400 mile march from Alexandria, Egypt to Derna, where the American-led coalition promptly stormed the city while outnumbered 10-to-1, would never had come close to success were it not for the singular determination and skill of Eaton.³⁰⁸

With Eaton maintaining a tenuous hold on Derna in the spring of 1805, and with Samuel Barron incapacitated by liver disease, the American consul general, Tobias Lear, took charge of diplomatic efforts aimed at securing peace. A long-time confidante of the now deceased George Washington, Lear deprecated any idea of Americans allying with the pretender Hamet, and instead pressed for a negotiated peace with Yusuf. Lear was instrumental in drying up support and resources for Eaton's continued operations, which ultimately aimed at replacing Yusuf with the more pliable Hamet. Instead, Lear prevailed upon Barron, and then John Rodgers who took over command from the ailing commodore, to sail to Tripoli and negotiate. Eaton and many of Jefferson's Federalist critics believed that had Rodgers' squadron conducted a Preble-like bombardment of Tripoli in conjunction with a renewed land campaign, they could have compelled Yusuf's defeat. Instead, the desperate bashaw was allowed to

³⁰⁷ Eaton Papers, Boxes 7-8; *Naval Documents*, vol. 5, 348-561.

³⁰⁸ Two good accounts are found in Samuel Edwards, *Barbary General: The Life of William H. Eaton* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1968), ; and Joseph Wheelan, *Jefferson's War: America's first war on terror, 1801-1805* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 2003), pp. 232-305.

save face by demanding and receiving \$60,000 in ransom for the crew of the *Philadelphia*. He signed a peace treaty with America on June 10, 1805, and the war was over.³⁰⁹ Eaton was ordered to abandon Derna but came home to a hero's welcome.³¹⁰

In the years leading up to the War of 1812, the United States was able to secure peace with Tunis and maintain relations with Morocco and Algiers. But when the dey of Algiers launched his corsairs against the Americans again in 1815, the president sent Stephen Decatur, Jr. with a squadron to deal with him. Decatur managed to capture two Algerian warships, kill the ranking enemy admiral, and then sailed into the enemy's harbor with a massive fleet. The dey capitulated almost immediately, and, in Decatur's words, the Americans obtained a treaty "at the mouths of our cannon".³¹¹

The Tripolitan War featured an unremarkable and desultory American intervention into the waters and politics of North Africa. Under the command of one mediocre commodore after another, the United States Navy tried without success to use naval power alone to force the Pasha of Tripoli to terms. Even the best performer—the aggressive Commodore Edward Preble—failed to make an impression on the enemy ruler, whose capital appeared impervious to assault from the sea, and whose navy could routinely infiltrate the American blockade. A

³⁰⁹ *Treaty of Peace and Amity*, Tripoli, June 4 1805; Feb 15 2006, <http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/diplomacy/barbary/bar1805t.htm>.

³¹⁰ A. B. Whipple, *To the Shores of Tripoli: The Birth of the U.S. Navy and Marines* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1991), 243-276; William M. Fowler, *Jack Tars and Commodores: The American Navy, 1783-1815* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984), 119-123.

³¹¹ Wheelan, *Jefferson's War*, 347-357.

few tactical successes excited American nationalism and proved the mettle of the new generation of young officers, but they did not convert into strategic accomplishment until the intervention of William Eaton. As the theorist Clausewitz would write later in the century: "Everything in war is very simple, but the simplest thing is difficult."³¹² So it proved for the Americans' efforts to project military power against the bashaw of Tripoli. The difficulty of bringing together resources, aggressive leadership, and clear strategic direction became more than evident over the four years of war.

The Tripolitan War pointed both to Jefferson's shortcomings and his genius as a strategist. The most conspicuous failure early in the war was Jefferson's decision to cut the strength of the navy simultaneously with conducting operations in the Mediterranean. This decision, based on faulty economics, resulted in few ships and even fewer capable seamen. Still, it was not the lack of firepower that doomed the Americans' initial efforts. It was lack of aggressive leadership and, to a degree, the initial dearth of shallow-draft gunboats. The inexplicable lethargy of Dale and Morris caused the war to stagnate. Since Jefferson and Samuel Smith were charged with choosing the leadership of the squadrons they sent, their initial choices were conspicuous strategic failures.

In forming a strategy for war, national leaders must play a guessing game in trying to determine what actions will compel the enemy to agree to their terms. Underestimating enemy resolve is an oft-repeated mistake in war, and Jefferson's administration was guilty of this classic error. The idea that a

³¹² Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* (London: Penguin Books, 1984), 164.

desultory blockade and a show of strength would cause the bashaw to abandon his modus operandi for collection of wealth was short-sighted. It was only when he was faced with the possibility of regime change or personal destruction that he relented. Had Jefferson understood this from the start, he may either have chosen not to go to war, or to have girded for a more aggressive policy from the start.

The genius of the Tripolitan War strategy is difficult to perceive. There were some exciting tactical moments: the *Enterprise* defeating the *Tripoli* without losing a man, the various bombardments of enemy ports, the firing of the *Philadelphia*, and, of course, Eaton's exploits of derring-do. But the strategy, at first glance, seems desultory, lacking energy and direction, and incompetent. From the perspective of a modern superpower, we expect the president to lay out a stern and unwavering directive that enumerates conditions for victory and hands the enemy an ultimatum: surrender or die. But Jefferson's handling of the war with Tripoli was much more subtle and ultimately successful, if not conspicuously brilliant.

The art of strategy is not concerned with splendid tactical events. Rather, it must be focused on the more crucial, large-scale issues of balancing ends, ways, and means. When a country's very existence is threatened, the "ends" of strategy are extreme—to defeat the enemy and/or compel his surrender. These extreme ends both demand and enable the use of equally extreme means and ways. When the majority of citizens in a republic feel the threat of destruction,

they are willing and able to acquiesce in conscription, high taxes, and staggering casualties. Large-scale ends are coordinate with large-scale means.³¹³

The converse is also true. When the perceived ends of a given strategy are small-scale, the means and ways must also be small. During the ethnic conflict in Kosovo in the 1990s, President Clinton's decision not to use ground forces invited much condemnation from pundits. After all, they reasoned, if we are going to fight a war, we must fight to win. But Clinton and his advisors understood that the potential end-state in Kosovo would be, at best, the achievement of a tenuous cease-fire between ethnic factions. There would be no real gain for America there. Hence, from the American perspective, the ends of the Kosovo strategy would be small-scale. It would be a capital mistake, then, to commit great armies, money, and lives for the achievement of so little. The marginal ends demanded the expenditure of marginal means. The resulting Kosovo strategy, if it did not please the pundits, was *balanced*, and that is the definition of good strategy.

Similarly, the war with Tripoli was not a matter of life or death for most Americans. We were not going to annex land or defeat an invasion of our continent. Instead, we were attempting to secure our merchant shipping against one of several piratical powers. Some regions of the country were vitally and emotionally connected to this pursuit, while others viewed it as utterly unimportant. The best we could hope to achieve was a relatively small-scale, temporary security of our economic interests in the Mediterranean Sea. Hence, the limited ends of the Tripoli strategy called for the expenditure of limited means.

³¹³ Clausewitz, *On War*, 122-137.

In achieving the right balance, Jefferson showed himself to be a good strategist, while simultaneously exposing himself to criticism of his political opponents.

The Americans' efforts against Algiers, Tripoli, and the other Barbary powers produced long-term effects. In fact, with the American example of defiance, the great powers of Europe began to rankle against the tribute system.

As Jefferson put it:

“There is reason to believe the example we have set, begins already to work on the dispositions of the powers of Europe to emancipate themselves from that degrading yoke. Should we produce such a revolution there, we shall be amply rewarded for all that we have done.”³¹⁴

In the course of the mid-1800s the Barbary coast ceased to be a threat to American and European shipping. What had once been a dreaded source of irresistible pirates became a handful of third-rate powers ripe for European colonialism. Meanwhile, following Jefferson's original penurious naval policy, the War of 1812 saw the resurgence of American sea power.

Jefferson and the Indians

The historiography of Jefferson's dealing with the Indians suffers from a common perspective that views the issue from a moral or ethical perspective. The titles alone of books on the subject reveal the moral bias of many writers: *American Indian Holocaust and Survival*, by Russell Thornton; *Jefferson and the Indians: the Tragic Fate of the First Americans*, by Anthony F. C. Wallace; and the provocative *Custer Died for Your Sins: an Indian manifesto*, by Vine

³¹⁴ Jefferson to Judge Tyler, Monticello, March, 1805, Washington Ed. iv, 574.

Deloria.³¹⁵ The fate of the native Americans at the hands of successive administrations throughout the 19th century has left an indelible sense of guilt on the nation, and this pervasive remorse colors historians' perceptions and interpretations. My goal, conversely, is to lay aside the moral and ethical implications of Jefferson's handling of Indian affairs and instead analyze his actions in terms of the actual national security problems of the day. One can view a policy through an ethical lens and declare it bad while at the same time another can look at it from the perspective of national security and proclaim it good. The issue for this study is a simple one: did Jefferson's Indian policy make the nation more or less secure?

In addition to allowing cultural bias into their histories, some critics of Thomas Jefferson also make the mistake of blaming him for the sins of an entire nation. Wallace's critical look at Jefferson, for example, does a splendid job of detailing the president's policies but fails to grasp the larger contextual inevitabilities: that the reach of the federal government vis a vis the Indian problem was very short. There was little any president or governmental policy could do, for example, to restrict white encroachment, prevent the sale of liquor to Indians, or change cultural prejudices. There was, in brief, a measure of inevitability in the history of the American Indian, and even the most strident condemnation of white policy fails to derive any reasonable alternatives. Rather than extracting Jefferson's actions from the context of the early 19th century, it

³¹⁵ Russell Thornton, *American Indian Holocaust and Survival: a Population History Since 1492* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987); Anthony F. C. Wallace, *Jefferson and the Indians: the Tragic Fate of the First Americans* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard

would be more to the point to compare his actions to those of his contemporaries. In this we would find Jefferson to be far more compassionate than others both in government and out.

When Jefferson succeeded to the presidency the Indians represented a potential threat to the national security. This is not to say in any way that white Americans were not at fault. They, too, had a long history of violence and abuse toward native Americans. European settlement in America was a threat to the national security of the Indian nations, too. But from the perspective of the government of the United States, the American Indians were a danger. Although they usually practiced limited warfare against European incursions, they had a history of violence dating back to the first Tidewater Wars of the 17th century (when sudden attacks almost extinguished the Virginia colonies), and they had been used as raiders and guerilla fighters by both the French and British in the past. British influence remained strong among the Indians of the Northwest Territory (present day Illinois, Indiana, and Wisconsin). The British had a long record of arming and supplying the Indians from Canada as the French had done before them. Prior to the Louisiana Purchase, the French, who had employed Indians as raiders during the French and Indian War, might be capable of using them again. And the Spanish, with their territories all along the southern United States, had ready access to the Indian tribes, including the Seminoles, Choctaws, and Creeks. European manipulation of the Indian tribes was a

University, 1999); Vine Deloria, *Custer Died For Your Sins: an Indian Manifesto* (New York: Maximilian, 1969).

constant theme of early American history and represented a clear and present danger in Jefferson's day.

"On the commencement of the present war, we pressed on them the observance of peace and neutrality, but the interested and unprincipled policy of England has defeated all our labors for the salvation of these unfortunate people. They have seduced the greater part of the tribes within our neighborhood, to take up the hatchet against us, and the cruel massacres they have committed on the women and children of our frontiers taken by surprise will oblige us now to pursue them to extermination... Their confirmed brutalization, if not the extermination of this race in our America, is therefore to form an additional chapter in the English history of the same colored man in Asia, and of the brethren of their own color in Ireland and wherever else Anglo-mercantile cupidity can find a two-penny interest in deluging the earth with human blood."³¹⁶

During times of war, when Jefferson's normal discretion was brushed aside by his impulses toward nationalism, his prejudice and antipathy toward the Indians that were fighting against his nation emerged.

"I am sorry to hear that the Indians have commenced war, but greatly pleased you have been so decisive on that head. Nothing will reduce those wretches so soon as pushing the war into the heart of their country. But I would not stop there. I would never cease pursuing them while one of them remained on this side the Mississippi."³¹⁷

"The Indians... will yield, and be thrown further back. They will relapse into barbarism and misery, lose numbers by war and want, and we shall be obliged to drive them with the beast of the forest into the stony mountains."³¹⁸

But to characterize these rough words as representative of Jefferson's true feelings concerning the Indians would be inaccurate. He was writing on both occasions during a time of war in the context of Indian aggression. His anger

³¹⁶ Jefferson to Baron de Humboldt, December, 1813, Washington ed. vi, 269.

³¹⁷ Jefferson to John Page, Philadelphia, 1776, Ford ed. ii, 73.

³¹⁸ Jefferson to John Adams, Monticello, 1812, Washington ed. vi, 62.

stemmed not simply from cultural bias, but also from the certainty that the hated British were behind the depredations. In truth, taken as a whole, Jefferson's writings indicate an altogether different opinion concerning the Indians.

Rather than succumbing completely to the racial prejudice of his day, Jefferson, as a son of the Enlightenment, believed that despite the technological disparity between the red man and white, the Indians were fundamentally equal to those of European descent.

"It is in North America we are to seek their original character. And I am safe in affirming, that the proofs of genius given by the Indians of North America place them on a level with whites in the same uncultivated state. The North of Europe furnishes subjects enough for comparison with them, and for a proof of their equality, I have seen some thousands myself, and conversed much with them, and have found in them a masculine, sound understanding...I believe the Indian to be in body and mind equal to the white man."³¹⁹

Despite his critics' antipathy, there can be little doubt that Thomas Jefferson was genuinely sympathetic to the plight of the American Indians. But his sympathy was not akin to that of the detached, modern student looking backward through the lens of a liberal, democratic superpower. Rather, his views existed within the context of the vast clash of civilizations that he was born into and that would continue well past his death. In that context it was perfectly congruent for Jefferson to be simultaneously sympathetic and yet irretrievably biased against the hunter/gatherer culture of the Indians. He remained fascinated by Indian history yet assured of its dismal future as well. A collector of treasured Indian artifacts, he looked forward to the eradication of the culture that produced them, in favor of the Indians' assimilation into an agricultural society.

“The decrease of game rendering their subsistence by hunting insufficient, we wish to draw them to agriculture, to spinning and weaving.”³²⁰

“I consider the business of hunting as already become insufficient to furnish clothing and subsistence to the Indians. The promotion of agriculture, therefore, and household manufacture, are essential in their preservation, and I am disposed to aid and encourage it liberally.”³²¹

Rather than condemning the writer of the Declaration of Independence for his supposed hypocrisy, one can just as easily point to Jefferson’s discretion and restraint toward the Indians. He fully intended to supervise their continued removal and assimilation, but he was equally determined to do so in a manner that would benefit the individuals while destroying their culture. Above all, Jefferson’s policies, if they lacked strength in enforcement, at least were rich in practicality. The threat of foreign intrigue was real, as evidenced by the part Indians played in the War of 1812.³²²

Jefferson’s Indian policy included the continued, gradual, and peaceful acquisition of land for white settlement. He made it clear in his communication to territorial governors and Indian agents that he wanted to maintain peaceful relations with the various tribes and acquire their land through purchase agreements. At the same time he intended to extend trade among the Indians for the dual purpose of providing them the means to convert to agriculture and to coax them into debt, whereupon they could sell their lands to the federal

³¹⁹ Jefferson to General Chastellux, Paris, 1785, Washington ed. i, 341.

³²⁰ Jefferson to Governor William H. Harrison, Washington, 1803, Washington ed. iv, 472.

³²¹ Jefferson to Benjamin Hawkins, 1803, Washington ed. iv, 467.

³²² Donald R. Hickey, *The War of 1812: A Forgotten Conflict* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 5-28.

government. The conversion to agriculture would in turn make the Indian tribes less dependent on vast hunting lands and instead make more productive use of smaller tracts. The white culture's bias against using lands for hunting grounds was pervasive in Jefferson's day.

“To ratify a heathen nation Who have no better right to this land than we have ourselves; and they have by estimation nearly 100,000 acres of land to each man of their nation and of no more use to government or society than to saunter about upon like so many wolves or bares, whilst they who would be a supporter to government and improve the country must be forced even to rent poor stoney ridges to make a support or rase their families on whilst there is fine fertile countries lying uncultivated, and we must be debared even from enjoying a small Corner of this land.”³²³

While this pervasive bias was certain to be destructive of Indian culture, Jefferson had equally strong impulses toward helping and protecting the Indians. Unfortunately his initial intentions of limiting the reach of federal government tended to leave the details of his policies in the hands of local and state/territorial governments to handle. Since the local officials and militias were solely composed of the very white settlers who craved Indian lands, the result would be foreordained.³²⁴

Jefferson intended to force the Indian tribes, particularly in the south, into assimilation by slowly obtaining lands along the Mississippi. This acquisition would have two purposes—one explicit and the other implicit. The former purpose was to provide secure communications between American settlement around Natchez and the territories of Tennessee and Kentucky. The more

³²³ Francis P. Prucha, *American Indian Policy in the Formative Years: The Indian Trade and Intercourse Acts, 1790-1834* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970), 162.

³²⁴ Wallace, *Jefferson and the Indians*, 10.

secretive purpose was to encircle the Indian nations as a means to forcing them to accept an agricultural lifestyle.³²⁵

“The ultimate point of rest and happiness for them is to let our settlements and theirs meet and blend together, to intermix, and become one people. Incorporating themselves with us as citizens of the United States, this is what the natural progress of things will of course bring on, and it will be better to promote than to retard it.”³²⁶

“I shall rejoice to see the day when the red men, our neighbors, become truly one people with us, enjoying all the rights and privileges we do, and living in peace and plenty as we do, without any one to make them afraid, to unjure their persons, or to take their property without being punished for it according to fixed laws.”³²⁷

“Our settlements will gradually circumscribe and approach the Indians, and they will in time either incorporate with us as citizens of the United States, or remove beyond the Mississippi. The former is certainly the determination of their history most happy for themselves; but in the whole course of this it is essential to cultivate their love.”³²⁸

At the same time Jefferson’s administration, working through Indian agent Colonel Benjamin Hawkins and the territorial governments, went about directly negotiating for the purchase of key tracts of land. Initially this effort resulted in the acquisition of relatively small tracts in the Mississippi Territory and Georgia, but after the Louisiana Purchase it included vast regions north of the Ohio River and west of the Mississippi, as well as critically needed tracts in Tennessee. In some cases these acquisitions benefited the Indians involved. The cession negotiated with Jean Baptiste du Coigne, chief of the Kaskaskias, for example, gave the small tribe their only chance for survival against the depredations of the

³²⁵ Wallace, 218-225.

³²⁶ Jefferson to Benjamin Hawkins, 1803, Washington ed. iv, 467.

³²⁷ Jefferson to the Cherokee Chiefs, 1808, Washington ed. viii, 214.

Shawnee and Potawatomis as the United States took on the responsibility of defending the Kaskaskias.³²⁹

In other cases the cessions eventuated in war. When William Henry Harrison coerced the Delaware along the north bank of the Ohio to cede their lands, the parent tribes who had allowed the Delaware to settle there protested that the Indians who had signed the agreement had no legal authority to do so. A subsequent conference among the offended chiefs and Harrison resulted in a short-lived but happy concord that years later would give rise to war. The Indians' aggravation at having been deprived of lands north of the Ohio River led to the rise of the Prophet and his brother Tecumseh, who would pull together a confederation against America in the opening days of the War of 1812.³³⁰

Still, Jefferson's policy goals had been largely met by the middle of his second term, and the Indian tribes between the Atlantic coast and the Mississippi were all but surrounded by white settlement. He had also secured lands in southern Michigan and northern Ohio, which helped to protect Detroit. As Jefferson foresaw, this encirclement would eventually lead to the eradication of the Indians' way of life—preferably peaceably. The moral implications of these land acquisitions aside, they were crucial to securing the United States against British aggression from Canada in the War of 1812.³³¹

By the end of his second term in office, Jefferson had presided over the acquisition of nearly 200,000 square miles of Indian land, all without falling into

³²⁸ Jefferson to Governor William H. Harrison, Washington, 1803, Washington ed. iv, 472.

³²⁹ Dumas Malone, *Jefferson the President: First Term, 1801-1805* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1970), 247, 275.

³³⁰ Hickey, *War of 1812*, 5-28.

open war with the former owners. As Anthony Wallace sums up the achievement:

“As he left office, the banks of the Ohio were safe, much but not all of the Mississippi shoreline was in the government’s hands, and public roads traversed Indian territory in a number of directions, connecting American forts, frontier settlements, and centers of commerce. Jefferson had seen to the national security and the future expansion of the growing white population into the remaining Indian territory east of the Mississippi, a task which Andrew Jackson would nearly complete a few years after Jefferson’s death.”³³²

Wallace’s tone, of course, is condemning throughout his book, but his description points to the fact that Jefferson had achieved greater security for the nation. His commission as president was foremost to provide for the defense of his nation, not to satisfy the moral impulses of later generations, and in this even his critics agree that he was successful. Much of the criticism aimed at Jefferson’s Indian policy draws strength from what happened years after Jefferson died in 1826.

During the administration of Andrew Jackson, the United States government was responsible for the forced relocation of the Five Civilized Tribes to the west of the Mississippi. Thousands of Indians died along the “Trail of Tears”, an episode that became emblematic of the injustices suffered by the red man at the hands of the white. Congress’ Removal Act of 1830 was the legislation that led to the tragedy, but critics of Thomas Jefferson point to him as the source of the policy that inevitably led to it. Still, Jefferson was not directly culpable for the human disaster which occurred after his death, and it is unlikely

³³¹ Henry Adams, *The War of 1812* (Washington: The Infantry Journal, 1944), 3-5.

³³² Wallace, 239-40.

that his genuine sentiments toward the Indians would have led him to allow such an event to occur.

At the root of the problem was that the white settlement of North America resulted in a clash of civilizations. As time went on the white civilization continued to strengthen, and the Indian civilization continued to decline. When civilizations clash, particularly over land rights, the result is inevitable and can scarcely be restrained or even delayed. Racial bigotry, crime, and war will follow. From at least the time of the Revolution, and certainly after the Louisiana Purchase, the eventual white settlement of North America was inevitable, which is to say, the destruction of Indian civilization was a certainty.

To ponder the moral implications of this basic confrontation is an ongoing, fascinating, and fruitless occupation. If the student of history begins with condemnation of Jefferson's Indian policy, he must find himself ultimately back at the cradle of civilization condemning the Hittites for raiding against the Sumerians and Akkadians and pursue his moral crusade through the balance of human history. Modern, self-sufficient, liberal democracy, pontificating from the secure lands once bloodily contested by our ancestors can recline in morally judging the past. But the facts of history remain: civilizations clash, and violence is the result. Nineteenth century America featured such a contest between two civilizations, one immeasurably stronger than the other. Jefferson's warning to the chiefs in the Detroit area expressed the cold mathematics of this disparity: "in war they will kill some of us; we shall destroy all of them." In such a context,

the explicit or implicit policy making of a single president will make little difference.

The Strategic Calculation of Thomas Jefferson and the Louisiana Purchase

As Jefferson's first term of office drew to a close, he achieved a remarkable coup in foreign affairs: the purchase, for fifteen million dollars, of the ill-defined Louisiana Territory—an acquisition that more than doubled the size of the United States. This accretion in the country's territory was as much the product of circumstance as it was of Jefferson's decisions, but it was reflective of the president's strategic calculation, which was the foundation of his military policy.

By December, 1801, Jefferson had learned that Spain and France were negotiating the retrocession of the Louisiana Territory to France.³³³ The transfer of a critical part of the continent from a weakened Spain to powerful France did not bode well for American foreign policy. Jefferson observed that "There is on the globe one single spot, the possessor of which is our natural and habitual enemy...It is New Orleans."³³⁴ Because the Mississippi River was the main outlet for goods from the Ohio Valley and the entire American West, New Orleans was the focal point for both trade and conflict with European powers. Jefferson believed that in the long run, time was on the side of the United States. The population was growing and expanding westward. Eventually, simply

³³³ Cunningham, *In Pursuit of Reason*, 259.

³³⁴ Jefferson to Livingston, 18 April 1802, Ford ed., ix, 368.

mathematics would drive the Europeans out, as long as the government could avoid losing a war to Britain or France in the mean time.³³⁵

The president also perceived accurately the political dynamics of the New Orleans problem. In 1786 John Jay's abortive attempt to negotiate a treaty with Spain that acquiesced in Madrid's right to close the port had enraged the American West, and Jefferson had observed the potential for a sectional split. The westerners simply would not permit the national government to trade away their right to free navigation through New Orleans. If that right could not be secured by a government distracted by the needs of the northeast, then they would likely either seek independence or ally themselves with a European power. Hence, the Louisiana problem was ultimately about securing the nation from splitting apart.³³⁶

Until the United States was in a position to acquire the city and surrounding territory, it was to the Americans' advantage that Spain, among the various European colonial powers, would retain it. Spain was weak, and Jefferson believed that he could negotiate with Madrid from a position of strength, or, if necessary, prosecute a war against Spanish troops with high hopes of success. He had learned by experience that Spain was malleable during the crisis of the mid-1780s, when Madrid tried to flex its muscles by disputing the Americans' right of navigation through New Orleans. But if France

³³⁵ Jefferson to Hugh Williamson, 30 April 1803, Lipscomb and Bergh ed., x, 386.

³³⁶ Charles A. Cerami, *Jefferson's Great Gamble* (Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks, Inc., 2003), 8-14

were to acquire Louisiana, Napoleon would have his hand on the throat of the American west, and that was unacceptable.³³⁷

Jefferson conveyed his misgivings through Charles Pinckney in Madrid, Robert Livingston in Paris, and later Pierre Samuel Du Pont de Nemours and his son Victor, and in response to Federalist war fever, he also prepared his protégé James Monroe for a special mission to Paris. The president's strategy was to avoid war with France if at all possible, because of the danger of losing to Napoleon's forces on the one hand, or being forced into a compact with England on the other. In order to convince Napoleon about the seriousness of the threat to America should France acquire Louisiana, he pointed out that such an eventuality would almost certainly push the United States into an alliance with Great Britain.³³⁸

Napoleon had a vision for a French empire in the Americas, but it was a vision that was destined to die in the first three years of the Jefferson administration. In addition to Louisiana, French interests included the western half of the island of Santo Domingo, which had been ceded to France in 1697. In the turmoil of the French Revolution, slave revolts on the island left French control weak, and the British seized the opportunity to invade the island in 1793. Malaria, yellow fever, and continuous slave revolts confounded the British, and their troubled sojourn there gave rise to an ingenious ex-slave-turned-guerilla-leader, Francois Dominique Toussaint. An educated black who had formerly served with French forces, Toussaint built up a disciplined insurgent army that

³³⁷ Jefferson to William C. Claiborne, Washington, 1801, Ford ed., viii, 71.

³³⁸ Jefferson to Livingston, 18 April 1802, Ford ed., ix, 368.

progressively gained control of the island. In 1798 he completed his conquest and became the master of the devastated island nation. He attempted to put together an economic order that would strengthen his government and placate the freedom-loving population at the same time, but with foreign influence temporarily removed, the former slaves of Toussaint's army wanted to live as free men and lost their sense of loyalty to their leader. The stage was set for the French to return.³³⁹

In 1802, Napoleon's brother-in-law, General Charles Leclerc, landed on the island and began a rapid conquest of the coastal towns. He then set about raiding and destroying Toussaint's guerilla forces until the rebel leader offered his surrender, which Leclerc accepted. In accordance with Napoleon's direction to him, the general then treacherously seized Toussaint and shipped him off to France, where he died in prison. When Paris signaled that a restoration of slavery was in the offing, the population again erupted into rebellion. At the same time, malaria and yellow fever struck the European troops, devastating regiment after regiment and threatening the French presence on the island. What could have been a convenient off-shore base for Napoleon's conquest of Louisiana thus became a serious obstacle and a logistical nightmare.³⁴⁰

In October, 1802, the situation in Louisiana was exacerbated when the Spanish intendant, Don Morales, withdrew the Americans' right of deposit in New Orleans. This act, in combination with the rumors of the French retrocession, brought war fever to a new intensity. The Federalists, hoping to recoup some

³³⁹ Cerami, *Jefferson's Great Gamble*, 45-54.

³⁴⁰ Ibid.

political power, postured in favor of immediate seizure of the disputed city.³⁴¹

Instead, Jefferson stayed the course, appealing to Madrid through his minister there. The Republican majority in Congress aligned themselves with the president, and war was avoided for the time being.

As the crisis over Louisiana deepened, Napoleon had a change of heart. The failed campaigns in Santo Domingo, the prospect of renewed conflict on the European mainland, and dwindling French coffers had convinced him that throwing another army into the Americas would be an unfeasible distraction. Instead, he might use the opportunity of the retrocession and the Americans' anxieties over New Orleans to bolster his finances. In the spring of 1803, just as James Monroe was arriving in Paris, Napoleon directed his finance minister to sell Louisiana to the Americans. The treaty was signed on May 2nd, and news of the deal reached Washington in July.³⁴²

The Louisiana Purchase was the product of extraordinary circumstances ranging from yellow fever to Spanish provocation to French duplicity. But it also came about from the strategic calculation of Thomas Jefferson, who read the situation with remarkable clarity and foresight. Jefferson's strategic framework consisted of several principles:³⁴³

1. The disposition of western lands in the Americas invited the influence of and potentially invasion by European powers, chiefly Britain and France.

³⁴¹ Cunningham, *In Pursuit of Reason*, 262, and Cerami, *Jefferson's Great Gamble*, 126.

³⁴² Cerami, *Jefferson's Great Gamble*, 201-06. See also *Treaty Between the United States of America and the French Republic*, signed 2 May 1803, ratified 20 Oct 1803; 15 Feb 2006, <http://earlyamerica.com/earlyamerica/milestones/louisiana/text.html>.

2. Occupation of Louisiana by either of these two powers was unacceptable and would lead almost inevitably to an American alliance with the other.
3. Spain, on the other hand, was fundamentally weak, and until the United States could acquire Louisiana, Spain was the preferred owner.
4. European war, or the threat of it, would distract both Britain and France from their interests in the Americas.
5. New Orleans and the Louisiana Territory were critical to the success of the United States. The political party that secured them would win the loyalty of the west both to the United States and to the party.
6. Time was on the side of the Americans, because population and economic growth would soon result in overwhelming American strength along the Mississippi. Hence, the longer war could be avoided, the stronger the United States' position would be.

As Jefferson's first term was coming to a close, his re-election was almost a foregone conclusion. The acquisition of Louisiana was immensely popular and a crowning achievement for the administration. Jefferson, the "half-way pacifist", had avoided blundering into war and instead used a combination of threats, patience, and economic suasion to wrest from European control what had become almost the "western coast" of the United States. With almost no navy and a tiny army, Jefferson rattled the saber and achieved the conquest of 800,000 square miles.

³⁴³ Cunningham, *In Pursuit of Reason*, 141-149, 259-265.

Conclusion

By the end of his first term in office, Thomas Jefferson had constructed, if not an optimal military policy, then at least one that was rational, balanced in terms of resources and objectives, and cognizant of both internal and external threats. In line with Jefferson's anxieties about corruption and anti-Republican conspiracies, he built a military establishment designed more to answer the needs of economy and the protection of domestic liberty than to repel a foreign invasion. Modern interpretations of Jefferson's policies can be harsh, the more so when they lack the context of early America's essential weakness and the very real threats that were developing within the republic.

Thus, up until 1805, Jefferson's military policy was reasonably effective and perhaps a key to the United States' continued existence through Jefferson's administration. But with British provocation growing on the high seas, the chinks in the armor of the president's military establishment were about to be revealed. The closing years of his administration were to show that disarmament not only forestalled a Federalist coup, but also weakened the president's hand in administering his own policies at home and abroad.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Policy in Practice—Testing the Limits: 1805-09

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Thomas Jefferson was inaugurated for his second term as president on March 4, 1805, and he delivered a speech that trumpeted the successes of his first four years. He declared success in maintaining peaceful relations with Europe and in eliminating wasteful offices and taxes at home. He also reiterated his belief that rather than accumulating a huge war chest or fighting future wars on credit, that each war would be paid for as it was fought through the instrumentality of taxes as needed. He acknowledged that the purchase of Louisiana was controversial but reminded his fellow citizens that the larger the nation, the less likely it would be disrupted by local crises.³⁴⁴

Jefferson reaffirmed his Indian policy: the destruction of their culture is regrettable but inevitable, and it is therefore incumbent upon the government to help convert the Indians from a hunting/gathering economy into an agricultural one. He lamented that fact that certain elements among the Indians desired to keep things as they had always been. This over-zealous reverence for tradition

³⁴⁴ Jefferson, Second Inaugural Address, 4 March 1805, Washington ed., viii, 40-41.

and conservatism was, in Jefferson's view, as bad for the Indians as it was for the white man. Progress, not stasis, was the key to success.³⁴⁵

The president then went on to declaim against the anti-Republican press, but he noted with pride that rather than resorting to repressive measures from the government, his administration allowed the court of public opinion to pronounce judgment on the libelous attacks made against him. He viewed his re-election by an overwhelming majority as proof that a free and open democratic society will be able to distinguish between truth and falsehood and act accordingly. The inaugural address ended with a humble appeal for patience and support.³⁴⁶

It was as much a victory speech as a political statement. Jefferson's words of March, 1805 gave expression to his sense of how history had proven him right in his struggle against Federalism. His handling of the army and navy had been at the center of that conflict, and he was confident that his choices had been correct. But even as he was speaking, events in Europe were playing out that would threaten the United States and test the viability of the president's military policy.

The Spanish Problem

The government in Madrid was furious about the sale of the Louisiana Territory to the United States, and Spanish officials were determined to undermine the transaction by disputing the boundaries. They specifically disputed the American claim that the eastern boundary of Louisiana was the Perdido River. In his *Fifth Annual Message* to Congress in December, 1805,

³⁴⁵ Ibid, 42-43.

Jefferson pointed to Spanish incursions throughout the Louisiana Territory.³⁴⁷

The Spanish had also refused to comply with their earlier agreement to compensate Americans for losses during the War for Independence. The two sides were disinclined to negotiate in good faith; Jefferson believed the Spanish to be weak and uncooperative, and he did not shrink from the prospect of a war with them. He also anticipated that Spain would eventually lose all her possessions in the Americas.³⁴⁸

Jefferson believed that military success in any war with Spain was a foregone conclusion and would result in the United States acquiring the Floridas and the full extent of the Louisiana Territory.

I had rather have war against Spain than not, if we go to war against England. Our southern defensive force can take the Floridas, volunteers for a Mexican army will flock to our standard, and rich pabulum will be offered to our privateers in the plunder of their commerce and coasts. Probably Cuba would add itself to our confederation.³⁴⁹

When it became clear to him that Napoleon would not cooperate in pressuring Spain, Jefferson reasoned that the best policy for the United States was to seek closer relations with Great Britain. By positioning his country's foreign policy as a fulcrum between Paris and London, he could gain leverage over either when necessary. Still, Jefferson's basic distrust of English designs on America prevented a serious effort at repairing relations between the two

³⁴⁶ Ibid, 43-45.

³⁴⁷ Jefferson, First Annual Message, 3 December, 1805, Washington ed., viii, 46-53.

³⁴⁸ Jefferson, *To Chevalier de Onis*, Monticello, April, 1814, Washington ed., vi, 342.

³⁴⁹ Jefferson to Madison, Monticello, August, 1807, Washington ed., v. 164.

countries. As long as the *threat* of an English alliance was effective in Paris, there was no need to go further.³⁵⁰

As 1805 came to a close, Jefferson's administration was looking to a combination of money and military suasion as the means of wresting Louisiana and the Floridas from Spain. Although the nation's standing army remained minuscule, Jefferson used the threat of westerners rising up on their own initiative as the chief instrument to be used against Spain. He suggested through his ministers in Paris and Madrid that if matters were not settled to their satisfaction, the white settlers east of the Mississippi would simply march on Spanish possessions and take them by force. But in his *Fifth Annual Message* to Congress in December, 1805, he stated that he had given orders to American regulars to oppose any further incursions the Spanish might make into the Louisiana Territory.³⁵¹

The relationship between the president and Congress concerning foreign policy during the crisis with Spain is of some note. In line with his beliefs about the Constitution, Jefferson explicitly deferred to Congress regarding the decision to go to war or prosecute offensive operations against Spain. But underlying his political ideas and self-restraint was the more practical matter of means.

Jefferson's administration had pared the military down to minimal strength, and if the country were to go to war, Congress would have to appropriate funds for more troops and ships. He urged the Legislature to reform the states' militias so

³⁵⁰ Charles A. Cerami, *Jefferson's Great Gamble* (Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks, Inc., 2003), 58-59.

³⁵¹ Jefferson, *Fifth Annual Message*, December 3, 1805, Washington DC, Washington ed., viii., 48.

as to exclude persons over the age of twenty-six and those with families. His intent was to make the militia more easily mobilized, so that they could respond rapidly to Spanish incursions and buy time for the deployment of regular troops as needed.³⁵² Thus, in his strategic calculation, Jefferson viewed the office of president as having the power to command military forces and even deputize militias when necessary, but he looked to Congress for the authority and means to conduct major war.³⁵³

Jefferson also communicated to Congress his desire for them to appropriate money for the construction of gunboats and coastal artillery to defend the vulnerable seaports and coastal communities. He had not abandoned the idea of building a regular sea-going navy as well, but he offered two approaches to naval strategy simultaneously: an unconventional, wholly defensive gunboat strategy, and a conventional strategy built around frigates and ships-of-the-line. He even suggested that Congress add to the number of authorizations for captains and lieutenants. The Republican Congress eventually chose the former strategy and marginalized the conventional navy, but Jefferson clearly favored a balanced approach.³⁵⁴

In the end the attempt to solve the disagreements with Spain came to naught. Even after Jefferson was able to convince Congress to appropriate two million dollars to buy additional territory in the Floridas, Spain refused to

³⁵² Ibid, 49-50.

³⁵³ Ibid.

³⁵⁴ Ibid., 50-51. See also Gene A. Smith, *For Purposes of Defense: the politics of the Jeffersonian Gunboat Program* (Newark, NJ: University of Delaware Press, 1995), 36-57.

negotiate. But by then two momentous military events in Europe had changed the balance of power there, and Jefferson's attentions would be distracted by new threats.³⁵⁵

Crisis with Great Britain

On October 21, 1805 Napoleon's Combined Fleet under Admiral Pierre Villeneuve was intercepted by the British Fleet under Admiral Horatio Nelson near the port of Cadiz. The resulting Battle of Trafalgar was one of the most decisive naval engagements of all time, and it would have an immediate impact upon Thomas Jefferson's foreign policy, military policy, and strategic calculations. The political and military combinations in Europe that led up to one of the most decisive naval battles in history were entirely beyond Jefferson's influence, but they framed the president's national security strategy for the ensuing four years.

During the fourteen month interlude that followed the Peace of Amiens, Napoleon realized that unless he took decisive action, the Royal Navy would continue to blockade the European coast and cripple French trade. He decided to solve the British problem once and for all by invading the home island, and to that end gathered his armies near the Pas de Calais in the summer of 1805. To protect the troop barges in their channel crossing, he directed Admiral Villeneuve to gather the French and Spanish fleets and make initially for the West Indies (to draw the British fleet there) and then back to the English Channel. The French

³⁵⁵ Dumas Malone, *Jefferson the President: Second Term, 1805-1809* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1974), 78-94.

admiral managed to evade the blockading British ships, but throughout the summer, Nelson was in hot pursuit as Villeneuve made his way across the Atlantic and back to Cadiz.³⁵⁶

By this time, Napoleon had abandoned his plans to invade England and instead focused on his upcoming campaign against Austria. He order Villeneuve to break out of Cadiz with the Combined Fleet and make for the Mediterranean, there to cooperate against the small British army gathered in Sicily. On 19 October, the French and Spanish ships began to move from Cadiz.³⁵⁷

Nelson, meanwhile, had screened the port with a handful of frigates, keeping the main fleet some fifty miles offshore in order to lure his adversaries out to sea. As soon as his frigates reported the enemy ships' movement, Nelson ordered his fleet to intercept. Employing his characteristic aggressive style, he charged into the Combined Fleet in two columns, separating the French van from the rest of the fleet. In the confused melee that followed, Villeneuve was captured along with twenty French ships, and about 14,000 seamen from the Combined Fleet were lost—half of them killed and the other half captured. The British fleet was battered but did not lose a single ship. Nevertheless, the nation lost its greatest hero when Nelson himself was mortally wounded and survived only long enough to learn of the victory.³⁵⁸

The Battle of Trafalgar secured England from invasion and led to British naval superiority for the next century. Now the undisputed masters of the sea,

³⁵⁶ Dudley Pope, *Decision at Trafalgar: The Story of the Greatest British Naval Battle of the Age of Nelson* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1999), 79-100.

³⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 101-142.

³⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 188-258.

the British were determined to use their advantage to clamp down on French trade and starve Napoleon into submission. The French responded by changing their naval strategy from one oriented to main fleet actions—which they clearly had little hope of winning anymore—into a strategy of commerce raiding, the *guerre de course*. Both strategies were inimical to American interests, since the great prosperity the United States was enjoying rested largely on carrying overseas trade. Before President Jefferson could even digest the ramifications of the British triumph, Napoleon scored one of his own, this time on land.³⁵⁹

Having abandoned his plans to invade England, Napoleon ordered his troops to march toward Austria near the end of summer. Austrian armies had attacked Bavaria in September, and Napoleon was determined to knock Britain's key ally out of the war before the Russian or Prussian army could intervene. In less than six weeks, the French army reached the Danube and pounced upon the unfortunate Austrian General Karl von Mack at Ulm. Napoleon crushed the Austrian army and proceeded to Vienna, which surrendered to him after Emperor Francis I fled.³⁶⁰

Reveling in his victory, Napoleon was aware that his mastery of Europe was by no means accomplished yet. Prussia was threatening to join the British alliance, and Russian armies were en route to Austria to join up with what remained of the Austrian army. When the two allies united, they counted 90,000 against Napoleon's 75,000. Napoleon chose to defend near the town of Austerlitz, which was commanded by the nearby Pratzen Heights. On the eve of

³⁵⁹ Noble E. Cunningham, *In Pursuit of Reason: The Life of Thomas Jefferson* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1987), 282-285.

his greatest victory, Napoleon surprised his own generals by abandoning the decisive high ground and letting the enemy take it.³⁶¹

Napoleon knew that the young Russian Tsar Alexander I was anxious for a glorious victory. By giving the Russians control of Pratzen Heights, he was certain that he could lure them into an attack on his own right flank, which he had secretly reinforced. Meanwhile, in the early morning fog of December 3, while the Russians were moving according to Napoleon's plan, two French divisions were forming in the fog below the Russian center. Napoleon ordered the attack, and suddenly the Tsar watched with horror as 17,000 French soldiers emerged from the mist to crush his position on the Heights. Napoleon then followed up the victory by attacking the enemy from the rear and routing both of the allied armies. By the end of the day, nine thousand French soldiers were lost, along with sixteen thousand Russians and Austrians. The Russian Tsar limped back to his homeland with his defeated army, and Francis I surrendered to Napoleon. In a stroke, the upstart Corsican had defeated his principle land-based adversary.³⁶²

The following year the French emperor turned against Prussia, who had dared to oppose him without any continental allies. In October, 1806, Napoleon won the twin battles of Jena and Auerstadt, crushing the Prussians and leaving Russia to face the French armies alone.³⁶³ Tsar Alexander attacked the French in Poland, and in two battles—Eylau and Friedland—the rivals bled each other white but without decision. With both sides desperate for peace, Napoleon and

³⁶⁰ David G. Chandler, *The Campaigns of Napoleon* (New York: Scribner, 1966), 381-401.

³⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 413-442.

³⁶² *Ibid.*

³⁶³ *Ibid.*, 479-501.

Alexander met in the middle of the Niemen River and concluded the Peace of Tilset. Russia and France would become allies in the struggle against Great Britain...at least for the time being.³⁶⁴

With England in command of the seas and France the dominant land power in Europe, the two enemies sought for ways to strangle each other's trade. Great Britain had to depend upon the Royal Navy to maintain the blockade on Europe, but they suffered a continual manning problem. Because life aboard a navy ship was harsh and the pay low, British sailors frequently deserted to serve aboard merchant ships, and American merchantmen were the most popular source of employment. In order to combat the drain on manpower, the Royal Navy routinely stopped merchant ships of other nations and searched for British sailors, impressing them back into the Royal Navy if found. From their perspective, this was a reasonable practice and the only way to handle the growing number of desertions. But Jefferson and most Americans saw both impressment and interference with neutral shipping as an affront to their nation's sovereignty.³⁶⁵

Jefferson's administration was also smarting over the *Essex* decision rendered by the British High Court of Admiralty in 1804 and confirmed the following year, in which the British decided to combat the process of American merchant importing goods and then exporting them from the United States as neutral cargo.³⁶⁶ As his second term progressed, Jefferson expressed alarm that the Royal Navy was capturing and impounding more and more American

³⁶⁴ Ibid., 535-592.

³⁶⁵ Jefferson, *Special Message*, 17 January 1806, Washington ed., viii, 57-58.

merchantmen. American overseas trade was colliding with British military strategy, and neither side could see a clear solution to the problem. Jefferson was sure of only one thing: he did not want a war with Great Britain.³⁶⁷

While the president fretted, Congress passed a weak measure aimed at coercing the British through economic suasion: the non-importation act of March, 1806. The act listed specific goods that would be banned starting in November. At the same time, Congress pressured Jefferson to send William Pinckney and James Monroe to London to secure a diplomatic solution to the growing problems on the high seas.³⁶⁸

When the results of the two men's efforts reached Washington the following year, Jefferson killed the proposed treaty in cabinet without referring it to the Senate, because it did not deal with the issue of impressments. The British rightly pointed to the ease with which their sailors could desert, procure false papers in America, and serve aboard American merchantmen. The Americans likewise complained (correctly) that the British were recklessly seizing not only true deserters, but also innocent Americans. Despite London's professed commitment to exercise greater caution in the future, Jefferson and most Americans continued to view impressment as intolerable.³⁶⁹

The conflict came to a head on June 22, 1807. The USS *Chesapeake*, an American frigate, set sail from Norfolk en route to the Mediterranean. Captain James Barron commanded the ship, but as it left port it was ill-prepared for

³⁶⁶ Malone, *Jefferson the President*, 97-99.

³⁶⁷ Jefferson to Dr. George Logan, Monticello, October, 1813, Washington ed., vi, 215.

³⁶⁸ Jefferson, *The Anas*, Feb., 1807, Ford ed., i, 322; see also Dumas Malone, *Jefferson and His Time*, Vol. V (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1974), 113.

action. Unstowed gear lay all over the decks, and the crew was short-handed. Shortly after it got underway, the HMS *Leopard* spotted it and sailed parallel to it for about forty miles out to sea. The *Chesapeake*, being an armed vessel of the American Navy, should not have been subject to boarding and search by the British, but the commander of the *Leopard*, supposedly under the orders of Vice-Admiral Sir George Berkeley, insisted that the American frigate submit to a search for British deserters. Captain Barron refused, and the British opened fire, rapidly disabling the ship, killing three sailors and wounding eighteen. When the Americans struck their colors, the British then boarded and carried off four men.³⁷⁰

Americans were outraged. War fever spread quickly, and both Federalists and Republicans clamored for war. Jefferson's response—quickly characterized as pusillanimous by his Federalist foes—was much more circumspect. He saw no advantage in going to war with England, and he reiterated his belief that the decision to go to war must rest with Congress. He preferred peaceful measures to the dangers of war with Britain, and by 1807 he could point to the Louisiana Purchase as the example of what patience and diplomacy could achieve if given the chance. Jefferson foresaw the day when the American population would grow to the point that the country could support a more assertive foreign policy, but until that time, he wanted to avoid war with the stronger European powers.³⁷¹

³⁶⁹ Cunningham, 295-96.

³⁷⁰ Allan R. Millett & Peter Maslowski, *For the Common Defense: a military history of the United States of America* (New York: The Free Press, 1984), 101.

³⁷¹ Jefferson to William Short, Washington, 3 Oct 1801; Andrew A. Lipscomb, et al., *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*. Washington, DC: The Thomas Jefferson Memorial Association, 1903.

On 2 July, Jefferson ordered all British vessels out of American ports. He later explained to Congress that because the Royal Navy was molesting ships even in American harbors, his administration was left with two possible responses: maintain a huge military (army and navy) presence in every port, or simply ban the British completely. The first option was unaffordable.³⁷² At the same time he dispatched the USS *Revenge* to London with an envoy to discuss the situation. Jefferson wanted the British government to disavow the attack on the *Chesapeake* and abandon the practice of searching public armed vessels. Jefferson wanted to extend protection from search to any merchantmen flying the American flag, too, but that suggestion was unlikely to carry very far in London. The American envoy was also to demand the restoration of the men taken, and the recall of Vice-Admiral Berkeley. But underlying the entire diplomatic initiative was Jefferson's desire to have the matter of impressment dealt with once and for all.³⁷³

Jefferson refused to recall Congress, partly because he wanted to give the war fever a chance to calm down. He agreed to call the legislators back early, however, and he scheduled the opening of the session for late October. Meanwhile, he alerted the state militias and then settled in to await word from London. As he contemplated the possibility of war with England, Jefferson saw that the conflict would at least provide an opportunity to seize the Floridas from Spain once war broke out.³⁷⁴

³⁷² Jefferson, *Seventh Annual Message*, 17 October, 1807, Washington ed., viii, 84.

³⁷³ Cunningham, 300.

³⁷⁴ Malone, *Jefferson the President*, 451-468.

As the weeks crawled by the chances for peaceful resolution diminished. The four deserters were tried at Halifax, and one of them—Jenkin Ratford—was hanged. Meanwhile, British Foreign Secretary Canning squashed any hope of tying the affair to the greater issue of impressment. He argued persistently that Americans were openly enlisting deserters from the Royal Navy and had closed their ports to British vessels. (Both allegations were true.) He dispatched a special envoy, George Rose, to negotiate in Washington.³⁷⁵

The situation worsened in the fall of 1807 when King George III issued a proclamation requiring all British naval officers to enforce impressment over neutral merchant vessels. Soon after, British Orders-in-Council prohibited trade with all continental ports from which the British flag was excluded and declared all vessels bound for open ports on the Continent must pass through British ports, pay taxes, and secure clearance before proceeding. This measure, combined with the effects of Napoleon's blockade of England in the Berlin Decree of November, 1806, guaranteed a difficult time for American vessels on the high seas.

With American merchantmen thus imperiled, the Jefferson administration took a precautionary step to protect her vessels: an embargo.³⁷⁶ Secretary of State James Madison was most likely the author of the plan, but Jefferson himself accepted responsibility for the plan. His government banned all overseas commerce, so that no American vessels would leave port. It was a weak response to British provocations, but there was little else to be done. Senator

³⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁷⁶ Jefferson, *Special Message*, 18 December, 1807, Washington ed., viii, 89-90.

Samuel L. Mitchill noted that “in a choice of evils an Embargo was the least.”³⁷⁷

Jefferson also considered increasing the regular army and called on the states to have their quotas of militia ready for defense as needed.³⁷⁸

Having chosen against war (probably a good decision), Jefferson focused for the ensuing final year and a half of his administration on enforcing the embargo (probably a bad decision.) In strategic terms, he became fixated on the *feasibility* of the embargo, rather than its *suitability*. He insisted to Congress that British depredations on the high seas and their increasingly intrusive policies of both France and England mandated a continuation of the embargo.³⁷⁹ When merchant interests in the northeast began to feel the pain of having stocks and ships rotting in port, they began to rail against the administration’s policy and to selectively disobey it. Jefferson reacted with distress at the evidence that federal law was being ignored, and he decided to take increasingly draconian measures to counteract the lawless trend. In the end, he was obliged to use federal troops in New England to prevent illegal trade with British Canada—a step he himself would have deprecated if taken by a Federalist president.³⁸⁰

The historiography of Jefferson’s embargo reveals wide divergence among historians as to the president’s motivations and thinking. Henry Adams saw the embargo as an outgrowth of Republican theory, Jefferson’s opportunism,

³⁷⁷ Mitchill to his wife, 23 December, 1807, Samuel Latham Mitchell Papers, Museum of the City of New York.

³⁷⁸ Jefferson, *Seventh Annual Message*, 17 October, 1807, Washington ed., viii, 87.

³⁷⁹ Jefferson, *Special Message*, 2 February, 1808, Washington ed., viii, 95; *Special Message*, 17 March, 1808, Washington ed., viii, 100; *Eighth Annual Message*, 8 November, 1808, Washington ed., viii,

³⁸⁰ Cunningham, 315-17.

and his fear of scuttling the American experiment.³⁸¹ Louis M. Sears believed that the embargo was an outgrowth of Jefferson's fundamental pacifism.³⁸² Bradford Perkins judged the whole affair as a colossal blunder and the product of Jefferson's incompetence.³⁸³ Leonard Levy was no more complimentary; he saw Jefferson as a confused tyrant making war on his own people to avoid war abroad.³⁸⁴ Merrill Peterson saw the embargo as a logical development of Jeffersonianism and as an effort to prove the virtue of the republic.³⁸⁵

By the time Jefferson left office, he was weary of the whole affair. His persistence in enforcing the embargo vilified him in the eyes of many, but the policy itself seemed to have no effect on European decision making. On the surface, then, the policy of embargo was a failure. But such a simple characterization is misleading. There were at least two features of the policy that were positive, as Jefferson himself explained to Congress. First, the embargo protected American seamen from capture and her ships from seizure.³⁸⁶ Secondly, the ban on British goods and markets served to stimulate the development of the American economy.³⁸⁷ Still, the tone of Jefferson's message to Congress hints of despair, and the points he singles out seem a bit of a stretch. The real genius of the embargo policy was that it obviated war with

³⁸¹ Henry Adams, *The History of the United States During the Administrations of Thomas Jefferson* 1047-48, 1054-55, 1110-55.

³⁸² Louis M. Sears, *Jefferson and the Embargo* (New York: Octagon Books, 1967).

³⁸³ Bradford Perkins, *Prologue to War: England and the United States, 1805-1812* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963).

³⁸⁴ Leonard W. Levy, *The Causes of the War of 1812: National Honor or National Interest?* (Malabar, FL: Krieger Publishing Co., 1976).

³⁸⁵ Merrill Peterson, *Thomas Jefferson and the New Nation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970).

³⁸⁶ Jefferson, *Eighth Annual Message*, 8 November, 1808, Washington ed., viii, 105.

³⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 109.

England—a war that the United States would not win easily. Dumas Malone hits upon this basic motivation:

“He [Jefferson] undoubtedly believed that war was justifiable and for a time seems to have regarded it as inevitable. His unwillingness to recommend it now cannot be properly attributed to pacifism on his part...The American President was a man of unusual patience who never doubted that time was on the side of his young country. The designation of him as a prophet of pacifism is unwarranted, but he was unquestionably a major prophet of non-involvement in world affairs.”³⁸⁸

Any military conflict between England and the United States would have played out with the same operational dynamics seen in the War for Independence: British dominance of the seas, and American resilience on the land. But the strategic elements of a war over shipping rights and impressments would have been very different from those of the American Revolution. In the former conflict, patience and determination were able to convince the British that further attrition of their forces would not accomplish their political objectives in North America. But in the early 19th century, there was little hope that any American military action or pressure would be able to radically change British policies on the high seas, especially since those policies were vitally connected to London’s war against France and, hence, to its very survival. At best, such a conflict would have been long and indecisive. At worst, it could spark a political crisis within the United States—perhaps even secession and civil war.

After the *Chesapeake* affair, war fever demanded action: “This country has never been in such a state of excitement since the battle of Lexington.”³⁸⁹ No administration could have survived politically if it had done nothing. The true

³⁸⁸ Malone, *Jefferson the President*, 472-473.

virtue of the embargo was that it gave the appearance of a decisive strategic response to British provocation, while at the same time keeping the United States out of a war it couldn't win. Viewed from the perspective of a 21st century American superpower, the embargo seems an effete and wasteful policy. But in the early 19th century, the United States was weak, and President Jefferson had to choose from among less-than-optimal policy options. Choosing an embargo allowed time for war fever to cool, and for Americans to better prepare themselves for a war against Great Britain. Because of Thomas Jefferson's strategic insight, that war would not come until his successor's administration, by which time the country was strong enough to survive.

The Hero of Weehawken

If the threat of foreign invasion remained somewhat distant before 1807, the danger from within was real and immediate. Aaron Burr, Jefferson's first term vice president, was implicated in a plot that served to highlight the brittleness and vulnerability of the early republic. Born in 1756 and educated at Princeton, Burr served in the Revolutionary War and rose to the rank of lieutenant colonel. After the war he became a lawyer and a powerful political figure in New York, vying with Alexander Hamilton. He served as state attorney general and then as US Senator, and he consolidated his control of New York politics through the Tammany Society. Able to control the state legislature's pick of presidential electors, Burr was powerful enough to secure the Republican nomination for vice president under Thomas Jefferson in the election of 1800. His narrow loss to

³⁸⁹ Jefferson to James Bowdoin, July 1807, Washington ed., v., 124.

Jefferson in the runoff and the president's decision to minimize Burr's role in the government caused Burr to look to the Federalists for political support. As the term of his vice presidency was coming to a close, Burr sought the governorship of New York and ran against the Republican candidate, who was backed by Alexander Hamilton. (Hamilton feared that Burr, if elected governor, would encourage New York and New England to secede from the Union. The bitter exchanges between the two men during the gubernatorial race led to Burr demanding satisfaction from Hamilton. The two met at Weehawken, New Jersey on 11 July, 1804, and Burr shot the luckless Hamilton to death.³⁹⁰

Fleeing New York and New Jersey, Burr began to turn his attention and energies to the American West. Developing numerous contacts throughout the region, including General James Wilkinson, Burr's audacious schemes included at one time or another, a revolution to separate the West from the United States, an invasion of Spanish Florida, an invasion of Mexico, and perhaps even a coup against Jefferson's administration.³⁹¹ In this effort Burr was able to enlist Federalist opponents of the Jefferson administration, as well as those who held dubious land grants in the west. The latter hoped for a separation from the United States as the means to secure their lands.³⁹²

³⁹⁰ Joseph J. Ellis, *Founding Brothers: the Revolutionary Generation* (New York: Vintage Books, 2002), 31-38.

³⁹¹ Thomas Perkins Abernethy, *The Burr Conspiracy*. Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1968, *passim*. Concerning the proposed coup, 42. See also Mary-Jo Kline, *Political Correspondence and Public Papers of Aaron Burr* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983). Although Kline's work disproves the supposed coup, the matter is beside the point. The key issue was that Burr's contemporaries *believed* such a move was possible. Jefferson's national security policy had to be built upon such perceptions.

³⁹² Buckner F. Melton, *Aaron Burr: Conspiracy to Treason* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2002), 3-20.

As discussed above the center of gravity of any plot in the West was New Orleans. The conspirators rightly concluded that who controlled New Orleans controlled the mouth of the Mississippi; and who controlled the mouth of the great river controlled all the waters connected to it. The western states, whose economies depended upon unrestricted flow of goods down the Mississippi, would make a deal with whoever controlled New Orleans.³⁹³

Burr's downfall was his connection to the infamous James Wilkinson. At the last minute, as Burr had begun moving toward New Orleans in the summer of 1806 to execute the plot, Wilkinson decided that he could secure his place in history as the savior of two countries—the United States and Spain, which two countries he “loved equally well”.³⁹⁴ At this time, Wilkinson was both Commanding General of the United States Army *and* in the pay of the Spanish. In order to secure both of these happy stations, he turned on Burr. Probably the chief influence in Wilkinson's decision was a frank letter from Secretary Dearborn, warning the general that he had been implicated in the plot.

“There is a strong rumor that you, Burr, etc., are too intimate. You ought to keep every suspicious person at arms length, and be as wise as a serpent and as harmless as a dove.”³⁹⁵

Meanwhile, Burr had made his way to Pittsburgh, where he recruited Federalist sympathizers and collected supplies. He even inquired as to the

³⁹³ Ibid.

³⁹⁴ Stuart, *The Half-way Pacifist*, 59.

³⁹⁵ Dearborn to Wilkinson, 24 Aug 1805, Wilkinson Papers, Chicago Historical Society, as quoted in Crackel, Theodore J., *Mr. Jefferson's Army: political and social reform of the military establishment, 1801-1809*, 115.

participants of the Whiskey Rebellion of 1794 and suggested that if it had been properly led, it would have succeeded. From there he moved to Blennerhassett Island on the Ohio River, where he conspired with his friend, Harman Blennerhassett, and the two of them arranged for further recruiting and collection of supplies and boats. As Burr continued to Cincinnati, Louisville, and on into Tennessee, where he met with Andrew Jackson, he duped numerous Army and militia leaders into thinking that his expedition was authorized by the Jefferson administration. Indeed, Jackson wrote to Jefferson to assure the president of his support in the expedition against the Spanish, whereupon Jefferson wrote back asking what expedition Jackson was talking about. Burr also tried to get William Henry Harrison to mobilize the militia of the Indiana Territory.³⁹⁶

Burr had been too free in admitting his designs to those he thought were his confederates. Many of his contacts were not supportive but instead began to inform the government of his plans. During his stay in Louisville, Burr attracted a number of key figures to his schemes, and most of his co-conspirators there, oddly enough, were Republicans. Notable Federalists began to write letters to Jefferson informing him of Burr's plots and naming those in collusion with him, but Jefferson was reluctant to act on the word of Federalists against fellow Republicans.³⁹⁷

James Wilkinson, having made his decision to betray Burr, concluded that it was in his best interest to forestall a possible war with Spain over the border

³⁹⁶ Stuart, *The Half-way Pacifist*, 71.

³⁹⁷ Cunningham, *In Pursuit of Reason*, 286-287.

between Spanish Texas and the Orleans Territory.³⁹⁸ Spain insisted that the Arroyo Hondo River was the boundary, while the Americans claimed it was the Sabine River, thus creating a disputed territory between the two rivers.

Throughout 1806 both sides conducted desultory patrols and troop movements that might have eventuated in war, but Wilkinson decided instead to press for a negotiated “neutralization” of the disputed land. His efforts were blessed with success, largely because the Spanish military commander along the Sabine, a Colonel Simon de Herrera, evacuated the area and crossed to the Spanish side of the Sabine on his own authority.³⁹⁹ Thus through the efforts of Wilkinson and Herrera, the peace was maintained, giving the American general the freedom to move against Burr in New Orleans if necessary. Once he secured the city and felt reasonably certain that the locals there would not spontaneously rebel, he began to move against Burr’s agents in the city.⁴⁰⁰

Jefferson began to receive reports of the Burr conspiracy from December, 1805, but he delayed acting until he could have Burr arrested on a clear violation of the law. In January the following year, he received solid testimony concerning the plot from Joseph Daveiss, District Attorney of Kentucky. Unfortunately for Daveiss, Jefferson was either suspicious or otherwise put off by the revelation that Burr’s supporters in Kentucky were mainly Republicans, and the president therefore did not act on the allegations. Later on that summer, Commodore Thomas Truxton and George Morgan both notified Jefferson of Burr’s plans to

³⁹⁸ Malone, *Jefferson the President*, 246.

³⁹⁹ Abernethy, *The Burr Conspiracy*, 138-164.

⁴⁰⁰ Malone, *Jefferson the President*, 248-251.

separate the West from the Union, but it was not until October, 1806 that the president began to act on the gathering information.⁴⁰¹

On 22 October, the Cabinet met and discussed the situation. They decided to send instructions to the authorities in the western territories to watch Burr and arrest him if the evidence warranted. Although Wilkinson was implicated as well, Jefferson delayed any decision concerning his ranking general. It is instructive, however, to note that whatever his beliefs concerning Wilkinson's loyalty, Jefferson had now been confronted with a potential Cromwell at the head of a United States Army. This scenario was a realization of all the fears conjured by radical Whig ideology, and it goes a long way toward explaining—even justifying—Jefferson's disinclination to build a large military establishment. Ultimately, Jefferson was compelled to stand behind his treasonous general, because Wilkinson was to become the star witness for the prosecution against Burr.⁴⁰² Earlier attempts by Jefferson and Dearborn to balance Wilkinson's power within the army by installing staunch anti-Wilkinson Republican, Samuel Hammond, as second in command of the 2nd Infantry Regiment failed.⁴⁰³

When Burr was finally apprehended in the Mississippi Territory in February, 1807, he desired to face trial in the Territory, rather than being handed over to Wilkinson's military jurisdiction or taken to the East. Instead, he was eventually transported to Richmond, Virginia, where, in the late summer he was

⁴⁰¹ Cunningham, *In Pursuit of Reason*, 285-286.

⁴⁰² Jefferson, *Seventh Annual Message*, Oct 1807, Washington ed., viii, 87.

⁴⁰³ Crackel, Theodore J., *Mr. Jefferson's Army: political and social reform of the military establishment, 1801-1809*. New York: New York University Press, 1987, 121-22.

tried and acquitted. The essence of the case was Chief Justice John Marshall's contention that in order to be guilty of treason, one must have assembled an army whose avowed purpose was to make war against their own countrymen. In the course of the trial, which focused on events at Blennerhassett Island, the prosecution could not produce these elements of proof. Jefferson remained publicly aloof for reasons of propriety, but he agonized over the results of the affair, and Aaron Burr walked away unpunished but politically ruined.⁴⁰⁴

The Burr Conspiracy, which wrapped up at about the same time as the *Chesapeake* Incident occurred, pointed to the vulnerability of the United States during the first decades after the Revolution. That Aaron Burr could progress so far in his designs, enlisting none other than the Commanding General of the Army, as well as notable politicians, including at least one US Senator, underscores the dangers faced by Jefferson's administration. When lifted from the context of the times, Jefferson's national security policy—especially his paring down of the military—might seem foolhardy. But when viewed with a firm appreciation of the dangers from domestic unrest and conspiracy, Jefferson's ideas on the handling of the army and navy seem wise.

Jefferson's Army

In the wake of the Burr crisis, Jefferson and Dearborn began to worry about the loyalty of officers in the Pittsburgh area and elsewhere. There was little to be done, however, because proving disloyalty would be a difficult matter.

⁴⁰⁴ Cunningham, *In Pursuit of Reason*, 290-294; Jefferson to James Bowdoin, Apr 1807, Washington ed., v, 65.

Further, there was still a genuine danger of foreign invasion, and in that event, the nation would need every serving officer to fight. Instead, Jefferson was able to use the war fever that followed the *Chesapeake* incident in 1807 to increase the size of the army and “dilute” the Federalist influence. Jefferson and Dearborn sponsored a bill that tripled the size of the army. Officer slots grew from 200 to 500. Five more infantry regiments were authorized, along with more cavalry and light artillery. A total of 6000 more authorizations brought the army’s end strength to about 9000.⁴⁰⁵

By the end of 1807 Jefferson had appointed over 60% of the new officers. Meanwhile, over the president’s two terms, about 75% of former Federalist officers left the service through retirement, death, or other reasons. The result was that after 1808, almost 90% of the officer corps was Republican. Jefferson came to rely upon this pool of loyal soldiers during the embargo crisis in 1808-09. In a move that he would have deprecated in earlier years, he ordered the regular army to replace state militias who were lackadaisically enforcing the embargo in New York and Vermont. The fears of Republican ideologues came true in the person of their party leader.⁴⁰⁶

In late 1808 Jefferson asked Congress for 50,000 volunteers and the authority to use them as worries about war with England again loomed. As the military establishment grew, the process of Republicanization continued. Cadet authorizations grew from 42 to 200, giving Jefferson more opportunities for patronage and further dilution of Federalist influence. Still, prior to 1812, about

⁴⁰⁵ Crackel, *Mr. Jefferson’s Army*, 169-76.

⁴⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 175.

73% of West Point cadets were from the northeast, while the rest of the army reflected a better balance of representation. William Skelton suggests that this imbalance in West Point may have been due to the obscurity of the school in its early years.⁴⁰⁷

After Jefferson left office, his successor, James Madison showed much less interest in the military. Both Madison and his Secretary of War William Eustis let both the army and West Point languish, which went a long way to the army's poor performance in 1812. Eustis disbanded the light artillery battery, and doctrinal innovations likewise came to a halt before the war.⁴⁰⁸

The War of 1812, however, ensured the continued survival and influence of Republican officers in the army. Following the war, Republicans in general became more Hamiltonian in their economic policies, but other aspects of Jeffersonian ideology persisted. Although Jefferson's military legacy left much to be desired, he was able to steer the army away from the danger of disloyalty, mutiny, or threat of a coup. Despite his ideological aversion to a large military establishment, Jefferson's administration presided over a huge increase in the size of the army by the end of his second term.⁴⁰⁹

Conclusion

Thomas Jefferson's second term was a disappointment to him and to his allies. But his handling of the dual dangers of the Burr conspiracy and the crisis

⁴⁰⁷ Skelton, *An American Profession of Arms: the army officer corps, 1784-1861* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1992), 26.

⁴⁰⁸ Crackel, *Mr. Jefferson's Army*, 180-183.

⁴⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

with Great Britain point to his superior strategic understanding. In a time when an unscrupulous man could concoct and put into motion an unlawful enterprise of the magnitude envisioned by Aaron Burr, Jefferson's wisdom in limiting the size of the army and restructuring the officer corps to eliminate pockets of disloyalty was crucial to the nation's security. With the army's senior officer, James Wilkinson, in Spanish pay, a large, disloyal officer corps might well have accomplished what George Washington forestalled during the Newburgh Conspiracy: a coup against the government of the United States. Jefferson's even-handed but determined management of the military establishment contributed to the defeat of such adventures.

It would be an easy matter to criticize Jefferson's lack of preparedness to deal with the international implications of the Napoleonic wars. He led or acquiesced in Congress' neglect of the navy in favor of building ineffectual gunboats. Thus when the crisis with England deepened over the Royal Navy's impressments and interference with trade, the country had no means with which to respond. Jefferson had, in effect, disarmed the nation in the face of international aggression.

But the reality of the situation in Jefferson's second term belies a simple evaluation. The combined navies of France and Spain could not stand up to the Royal Navy at Trafalgar, and it is absurd to imagine that the United States could build, sustain, and man a navy large enough to make a difference. Federalist pundits knew this and suggested that a small navy might at least act as a deterrent to London's predatory policies, but again this is unlikely. England's

survival depended upon a blockade of Europe and the uninterrupted manning of the Royal Navy. America's juvenile insistence on unrestricted free trade and freedom from search, seizure, and impressment was simply not realistic. The balance of power in Europe resulted in one block ruling the land and the other the sea. Just as ancient Athens built her foreign policy around the need to sustain naval superiority, so also Great Britain's security depended upon policies that did not accommodate America's self-absorbed interpretation of sovereignty.

Conflict, then, was inevitable. Given the population, infrastructure, political organization, and economic structure of the embryonic republic of the United States, any American administration would have to deal with Great Britain from a position of weakness. The war fever that erupted after the *Chesapeake* affair could not substitute for a well-considered policy. Jefferson's administration could have ridden the tide of public opinion into a war that it could not win, but the president judged that peaceful measures were more appropriate and safe. The resulting embargo, for all its shortfalls and lack of decisive outcomes, prevented disaster and distracted the people long enough for the immediate crisis to pass. If the results damaged Jefferson's reputation, they secured the country from the devastation that might have ensued if war had broken out.

There was an apparent irrationality in Jefferson's military policy, and it worsened through the course of his second term of office. The president who employed the United States Navy against the Barbary pirates more decisively than either of his predecessors simultaneously oversaw the reduction and marginalization of that same navy. The man who declared a large army a threat

to liberty and unaffordable presided over the growth of that army and its use to enforce civil law. The incoherence of Jefferson's military policy stemmed from his admittedly erroneous understanding of modern economics and an exaggerated fear of Federalist ambitions. But his military misjudgments were tolerable and most likely saved the nation from both domestic and foreign disasters. In the end, Jefferson demonstrated a masterful management of scarcity, weakness, and risk.

EPILOGUE

Thomas Jefferson and History's Might-Have-Beens

Once a year at Christmas, I watch Jimmy Stewart bumble his way through *It's a Wonderful Life*—a story about a man who learns what history would have been like had he never been born. By the end of the movie, George Bailey (Stewart) is transformed, and he sees his life and his decisions in a whole new light.

I have it on good authority that historians should avoid discussions about things that never happened. Speculation about possible permutations of history—the fascinating “what-if’s” that amateurs and novelists sometimes delight in—are anathema to the profession of history. Yet I can see no other way to properly evaluate Thomas Jefferson, for he lived and governed at a true cross-road of American history. One does not have to be blessed with a gift of prognostication to grasp the fact that without Jefferson’s leadership and ideas on governance, the history of the United States would have been dramatically different from what actually happened.

The election of 1800 had a direct and profound impact on the national security policy of the United States. Twelve years of Federalist rule had resulted in growing public debt, an unaffordable military establishment, and encroachment on civil liberties through the Sedition Act. From his office as inspector general of the army, Alexander Hamilton had been considering leading an army into Virginia to resolve his political differences with Republicans there. To decide the

electoral tie between Jefferson and Aaron Burr in 1800, hotheads from both political parties contemplated the use of force. The country was inching closer to insurrection and civil war.

Early 19th century America was populated with a generation of men who had self-actualized in revolution. They had taken the greatest gamble of their lives in plunging into a war for independence from Great Britain. But with the war and their independence newly won, they now had the much more complex task of deciding what new political form should emerge from the cessation of violence. For two administrations, the Federalists had been in the driver's seat. During George Washington's tenure, the reputation of the man himself kept at bay the violence of the political conflicts that were brewing. But with Washington in retirement, John Adams found himself beset by an active and hostile Republican press, while his own vice president—Thomas Jefferson—pulled the strings. Accusations, suspicions, and paranoia grew with each passing year until the Quasi-War with France nearly tore the country apart.

When Thomas Jefferson became the nation's third president in 1801, the United States were anything but united. There were three distinct sections of the country: the north, the south, and the west, and they each had conflicting needs and priorities. There were two political parties—the Federalists and the Democratic Republicans—but neither considered themselves a party, neither thought of the other as legitimate, and neither could envision a future in which party politics would become an accepted norm. Instead, the growing divergence of government philosophies gave rise to mutual recrimination and accusations of

treason. Within that context, influential men were easily seduced by opportunities for power grabs.

It is a matter of record that Aaron Burr, James Wilkinson, William Blount, and even Alexander Hamilton (to name a few) were engaged in unauthorized dealings with foreign powers. The early 19th century was a time in which honorable gentlemen would nevertheless plot against their own governments—sometimes for money, sometimes for the sake of conviction. If such men had a large army at their disposal, it is almost a certainty that their political dissatisfaction would have transformed into military action inimical to the Constitution they were all pledged to protect. The genius of Thomas Jefferson's national security policy was that no such attempted coup occurred. By managing a balanced reduction of the army and navy and then later growing both institutions when the need arose and their political loyalties were more sure, Jefferson may have forestalled a violent shift in the course of American democracy.

Recently I read a newspaper article in which modern scholars listed the top ten worst decisions by American presidents. Jefferson's embargo of 1807 made the list. Conforming to the traditional interpretation of the embargo, these scholars deprecated the ineffective attempt at economic coercion against Great Britain and pointed to Jefferson's own frustrated attempts to enforce the embargo against a growing popular insurgency against it.

But the odd thing about the scholars' list is that they also criticize James Madison for leading the nation into the War of 1812...and yet fail to perceive the

inconsistency. Jefferson's embargo was the instrument by which he avoided an unwise war with Great Britain. In his own words, his options were "Embargo, War, or Nothing" in response to the Royal Navy's attack upon the USS *Chesapeake* in 1806. This simple statement was fairly accurate. Jefferson and the Republicans could have done nothing to protest England's act of war...and thereby suffered political shipwreck in the wake of the war fever that gripped the nation. Alternately, they could have easily led the nation into war. But as Jefferson perceived, it would have been a war they could not possibly have won. By default, then, Jefferson chose embargo. Indeed, it was more a matter of not choosing war.

Thomas Jefferson's America was a weak nation whose ambitions far exceeded its means. The threats against the survival of the United States were many and serious, but Jefferson correctly saw that given time, the country would prosper and strengthen. To purchase the time required, his administration would have to accept less than optimal choices in foreign affairs. It would have been an easy matter to let the depredations of the British, French, and Spanish lead to war. But to gain anything from the blood spilt, the treasure spent, and the political will lost in such efforts would have been next to impossible. The United States lacked the means to project military power that could threaten London, Paris, or Madrid, so American strategy would have remained essentially defensive and indecisive. At worst, America could have been invaded or even succumbed to internal dissension.

Instead, Thomas Jefferson led the nation down a path of mediocrity. His actions were indecisive, ineffective, frustrating, and uninspired. But America survived and prospered, just as he had foreseen. There were no invasions, no coups, no civil wars during his term of office. Later historians like Alfred Thayer Mahan and Forrest McDonald, could bluster about the need for naval strength or deprecate Jefferson's marginalization of the military establishment, but they were viewing the problem from the context of America's later strength. Jefferson was playing with a losing hand, and his best option was to minimize his losses so that his country could survive.

From the trauma of two world wars and the subsequent Cold War, Americans came to think of national security as synonymous with military preparedness. By the turn of the twentieth century, the country was no longer in danger of domestic insurrection or upheaval. All of the nation's serious threats lurked outside her borders. Hence, national security became an easily comprehensible exercise in mobilizing and deploying the requisite military strength to keep the enemy at bay. But in 1801, such was not the case. Domestic threats to the Constitution loomed large, and in that context, Jefferson was wise enough to perceive that military preparedness was at best a subset of national security...and could even be inimical to it.

Jefferson was a man who favored balance over strength, endurance over activity, and patience over passion. His handling of the war with Tripoli revealed his impulses toward nationalism and justice on the one hand, but also his restraint and appreciation for the need to balance ends and means on the other.

The old proverb counsels “nothing ventured, nothing gained”, but similar logic dictates that if only little is to be gained, then only little should be spent. Since the best that could be hoped for in a war with Barbary pirates was a temporary peace and continued commerce on the Mediterranean, Jefferson rightly concluded that a full-scale mobilization of a navy, let alone an invasion force, would have been ill-advised. In the end, he led the nation to a victory within acceptable limits in terms of blood and treasure.

In his dealings with Indians, foreign challenges, and domestic threats, Thomas Jefferson pursued a wise, balanced course. If he fell short of awe-inspiring victories, it was more because of the nation’s weakness than any policy defects. If he failed to bring Britain or France to terms, he at least avoided defeat at their hands. If he left the nation’s defenses in a state of incapacity, as many historians have claimed, then he can also be credited with disarming any potential Cromwells or Caesars. In the end, one of Thomas Jefferson’s greatest accomplishments was what *didn’t* happen: the trauma of civil war did not strike the United States until 1861. Had the passions that burned in 1800 have boiled over into secession and war, there would have been no industrial north to eventually succeed. Instead, when Thomas Jefferson left office, he handed over to James Madison’s care a nation that was a bit more integrated politically and a little more used to the idea of party politics. The issues that might have torn the nation apart had been successfully deferred, and the threats from within and without had been lessened if not defeated.

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