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# 1

## *Born in the Struggles of Empires: The American Republic in War and Revolution, 1789–1815*

On October 8, 1789, Thomas Jefferson, American Minister Plenipotentiary to France, set sail from the grim port of Le Havre bound, via Cowes in the Isle of Wight, for the United States, thus ending 4 years of diplomatic service at a time of revolutionary change in France. Jefferson left his household in Paris, apparently intending to return, but fate intervened. On disembarking in Virginia in late November, Jefferson learned of President George Washington's offer of the position of Secretary of State. This honour he received initially with 'great regret'. Parrying the request, he ultimately responded favourably in late December to a second entreaty.<sup>1</sup> By handling the matter in this way, Jefferson displayed a certain reluctance to abandon the pleasant and intellectually attractive life he had led in Paris.

Jefferson had enjoyed his years abroad since 1785. His days were taken up with the affairs of a busy ambassador. He conducted consular services and diplomatic correspondence, observed industries and commerce across Europe, sought opportunities for American trade, kept an eye out for useful inventions and explored possible plant importations into America. The intriguing political situation engaged him too. He witnessed the early events of the French Revolution as they unfolded. His letters in 1789 and his autobiographical essay tell the story of that momentous final year of his stay, and the first of the French Revolution: on May 5, 1789, he attends the opening of the Estates-General at Versailles. On June 3 he urges, as a result of conversations with the Marquis de Lafayette, that the King should come forward with a Charter of Rights, the aim being to 'avoid the ill which seems to threaten'.<sup>2</sup> On July 13, he witnesses milling crowds around his carriage, the same menacing people that regathered the following day

to storm the Bastille. In August, Lafayette and other moderate leaders meet at Jefferson's house to discuss formation of a constitution.

Far from the provincial world of American politics and before the revolutionary turmoil erupted, he embraced the cultural life of Europe's greatest capital too. He travelled widely across France, visited the Low Countries, England, the Rhineland and Italy. He sunned himself upon the Canal du Midi in Languedoc with 'cloudless skies above, limpid waters below', and travelled to Vienne and Nimes to admire the relics of Roman occupation. In affairs of the heart, the enchanting Englishwoman, Maria Cosway, turned his head. But ultimately he rejected her, perhaps because of the alternative attraction of his slave, Sally Hemmings. Or was it the fact that Maria Cosway was a married woman? We will never know for sure. We do know, however, that for Jefferson home as well as heart and head competed. He loved France, but he loved his Virginia more. In some ways Jefferson, a Francophile, was also critical of many aspects of the society he observed. Like Jean-Jacques Rousseau, he expressed horror at the foppish French court and scowled at the coquettish French aristocratic women – they were not good republicans, not exemplars of womanly virtues of domesticity.<sup>3</sup>

Jefferson's own account of his leaving, written in 1821, shows how he chose to remember the revolutionary changes in his life; he was turning his back on Europe. As the small packet ship ploughed through the swell of the English Channel, France disappeared behind him. He left a country in the midst of a tumult in which he could only be a commentator. Soon, in Virginia, he would have new roles that meant turning from observer to actor, from Europe to America. Crossing the blue-grey ocean symbolized that shift. Despite his recollections to the contrary, he must have wondered if he would ever see his friends again; he must have anticipated the pull of American politics as the new republic started on its course as a federal state under the leadership of its first President.

France as an intellectual field of influence was not so easily discarded. Jefferson's letters teem with the events and consequences of the European revolutions; they display his affection for French friends and correspondents. Jefferson understood that the United States could not escape the global impacts of the French Revolution any more than France could the effects of its American forerunner. He thoroughly recognized global interconnectedness. The French Revolution was 'a wondrous instance of great events from small causes', he wrote. 'So inscrutable' was 'the arrangement of causes & consequences' that a two-penny duty on tea in one small part of the world 'changed the condition of all of it's [*sic*] inhabitants'. It was like the flapping wings of butterflies thousands of miles away. This was the 'Age of the Democratic Revolutions', as historian R. R. Palmer put it. The world was experiencing, Jefferson foretold, only 'the first chapter' of the history of that upheaval – the appeal of the rights of man would spread

globally. He laboured over the recollections of his time in France because of 'the interest which the whole world must take in this revolution'.<sup>4</sup>

The early American Republic, not just Jefferson's own career, was forged in the context of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars from 1789 to 1815. The influences were reciprocal. The United States' independence and its revolutionary catchcry that 'all men' were created equal had been infectious, and influenced the changing intellectual climate underlying the coming of the French Revolution. The American Revolution also affected the international movement against slavery as reformers in Britain responded to the loss of their colonies by seeking 'moral capital' in the rise of humanitarianism and reform of the British Empire.<sup>5</sup> But the United States could not avoid feedback from this turmoil. Quakers and other humanitarians sought to overcome the contradiction of slavery in a nation supposedly devoted to equality, and emancipated the relatively small numbers of slaves in the Northern states by individual and state action in the 30 or so years after the revolution. Yet even though Jefferson railed against slavery, he and other Southerners did little concretely to weaken its hold, largely because the economic costs of emancipation for the slave-dependent South were so high.<sup>6</sup>

The entire period from the 1750s to 1815 was an era in which the nascent republic had indisputable links to transnational processes, chiefly through global warfare. Nation-states were in formation, but the forces of nationalism and democracy were duplicated across two hemispheres. Americans had to shape their own sense of national identity in a complex triangulation with both France and Britain. By the end of the decade of the 1790s, the republic's leaders had gained a stronger sense of national difference despite their internal conflicts, but this new national identity was produced transnationally as American leaders navigated the perilous European conflicts.<sup>7</sup> The relationship with France had many a positive aspect in this early period that encouraged affiliation with this point of the triangle because the two great republics were born in the same moment of revolution. The United States had signed a Treaty of Alliance in 1778 that bound the new republic to that nation 'forever'.<sup>8</sup> The debt of French help in the revolutionary war remained an emotional tug, but historical affection soon clashed with the necessities of circumstance that the larger struggle for European supremacy produced. When Edmond Genêt (the French Minister to the United States) tried in 1793 to recruit Americans to fight in the European conflict sparked by the French Revolution, Jefferson as well as his Anglophile rival Alexander Hamilton cautioned George Washington to stay neutral.

Nevertheless, the American relationship with Europe was a source of deep internal division in the 1790s. As the rivalries of the Federalist and Democratic-Republican factions coalesced into the first American political parties, these depicted their opponents as on the wrong side of the great ideological contest. Federalists led by Hamilton and John Adams

tended to be pro-British while the new Democratic-Republicans aligned with Jefferson and James Madison sympathized with the ideals if not the detailed practice of the French Revolution. American politics in the 1790s was essentially fought out around these international interests – not in terms of foreign policy alone, but as touchstones of different ideological, cultural and political objectives.<sup>9</sup>

The United States was torn between intellectual affinity to the French Republic and the resurgence of commercial and cultural ties to the former mother country. Despite the political earthquake of 1776, US trade depended on Britain. Federalists favoured British financial connections while many Americans recoiled at the violence of the French Revolution and its attacks on organized religion. American evangelical religion grew in a similar reaction to that in Britain as a form of conservative inoculation against the virus of republican extremism. New England clergyman like Timothy Dwight preached evangelical domesticity as an antidote to revolution. Women would become the foundation of this conservative republican strategy. Republican motherhood rather than equal rights would be the favoured approach to the woman question among these American preachers and their congregations. Women should, through moral instruction of their young, provide the virtuous citizens required by a republic that could not depend upon force for the achievement of consensus and the maintenance of social stability. Dwight denounced Mary Wollstonecraft, the British author of *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, as ‘a strumpet’ for her impertinent, immoral and politically dangerous doctrines of female equality.<sup>10</sup> Evangelicals across the North established colleges called ladies seminaries to ensure that, while women should receive an education, it should be geared towards piety, purity and the cultivation of genteel arts and literature, not political participation as full citizens.

Simultaneously, the US government improved relations with Britain in 1795 through the Jay Treaty, settling maritime disputes and the boundary with Britain’s Canadian possessions. Enhanced transatlantic trade with the former mother country beckoned, but at the price of offending pro-French Republicans. The United States soon found itself defending its commercial interests against French naval interference. Attempts to negotiate a settlement of these differences produced further controversy. As a result of the XYZ affair of 1798 in which French officials tried to bribe American envoys, relations soured even more. The United States was now virtually in an undeclared war with France, and the crisis spurred creation of a Department of the Navy in 1798–99. Federalists pushed through the Alien and Sedition Acts in 1798 to crack down upon dissent and prevent naturalization of subversives. The leading publicists of the Jeffersonian party included European refugees, and they were among the foreigners targeted in the acts. Though a new treaty with France settled outstanding differences in 1800, the alliance of 1778 was formally abrogated and wariness concerning the French Revolution survived. George Washington’s

attack on 'insidious' foreign influences in his famous farewell address in 1797 reflected the meddling of the French and Democratic-Republicans in attempting to thwart the diplomatic initiatives of the Federalist regime. He established a tradition of non-interference in European affairs, but the reality of Europe's influence upon American strategic and economic interests could not be conjured away.

A reaction against the extremism of the French Revolution was also tied to its implications for the future of American slavery. No event of the 1790s abroad resounded more emphatically in the United States than the Haitian Revolution. In response to the French catchcries of liberty, equality and fraternity, slaves in the French colony of St Domingue rose in bloody revolt against their white and mulatto masters in 1791. The spectacle of whites being slaughtered by blacks brought to the fore the Southern planters' worst nightmare. Not only did the island's slaves kill whites; they also displayed capacity for organized rebellion and military action, thus threatening the growing American belief in the racial inferiority of blacks, especially when the Haitian rebels finally won their independence in 1804. Even abolitionists, aware of the volatility of the situation refrained in the most part from endorsing the right of rebellion: 'The entire antislavery movement was being debilitated'.<sup>11</sup> Jefferson worried that a trade treaty of 1799 might inadvertently allow black Haitian seamen to bring their revolutionary views into American ports, thereby infecting Southern slaves with the idea of freedom.<sup>12</sup>

The impact of the Haitian Revolution on the United States was demographic as well as ideological. Where wars and revolutions occur, a refugee problem is almost certain to follow. So it was in the late twentieth century, and also in the early nineteenth, when the Haitian upheaval promoted the American nation's 'first immigration crisis'.<sup>13</sup> Over 15,000 whites, mulattos and free blacks escaped with their slaves into the Southern states, especially Virginia. Others went to Spanish Louisiana (and many eventually became US citizens after 1803). The sudden influx heightened racial anxieties over emancipation and the colour line. The presence of free blacks was an inspiration to the enslaved, as was the Haitian path to revolution itself. The Gabriel Prosser plot of 1800 in which Virginian slaves conspired against their masters was stimulated by the Haitian example, which provided a 'metaphorical tool' to inspire resistance.<sup>14</sup>

Indirectly the French Revolution had impacts on the western hemisphere by throwing European society into such turmoil that the colonial rulers of mainland Latin America could no longer contain the dissent of local elites. Under the diversion of the Napoleonic Wars, all of South and Central America's Spanish and Portuguese possessions gained their independence in the decade or so after 1807. Mexico, the United States' most important neighbour over the next 100 years, threw off Spanish rule in 1821. Both Latin America and the United States shared a common heritage in this respect: they gained political leverage from the preoccupations

of Europeans with events elsewhere. The new Latin American nations diverged from the patterns of North American growth thereafter, but in the 1790s to 1810s, they did not seem completely different in potential. Latin American revolutionary general, Simón Bolívar, matched the exploits of George Washington.

European diversions enabled the United States to acquire the Louisiana Purchase, and so begin the process of pulling away from its Latin American rivals as a potential world power. The American takeover of this vast tract of territory, encompassing the whole of the Mississippi Basin to the west of the river, is often thought of as an act of ‘internal’ expansion that turned the country towards continental fulfilment. It all seems so inevitable from a national perspective. The United States may have been in Jefferson’s view ‘destined’ to spread its ‘empire of liberty’ westward but success depended on European contingencies. The territorial acquisition was neither possible nor necessary without the Napoleonic Wars. France had regained Louisiana in 1800–01, after losing it in the settlement of the Seven Years War in 1763. The French Emperor found himself master of the western Mississippi Valley, yet needed money for his military campaigns in Europe and the Middle East. More than finance was at stake, however. Napoleon was determined not to have the territory fall into the control of his mortal (British) enemy and viewed the expansion of the American Republic as a move in a larger game. As E. W. Lyon noted, Napoleon felt ‘he would so strengthen America that she would become in time a worthy rival of Great Britain’.<sup>15</sup> Thus did the Napoleonic Wars condition American territorial expansion. That development was not inevitable. Rather than the result of clever American diplomacy alone, European foreign policies and military imperatives facilitated the transfer.

Americans had their own objectives, to be sure. Jefferson was interested in the West and its environment partly out of scientific curiosity. In 1803, he sent out the Lewis and Clark expedition to explore the upper Mississippi Valley and the Pacific Northwest, but American attitudes were shaped not so much by the allure of the West as by the exigencies of European trade and politics. How could the future farmers of the Mississippi get their grain to markets? Lewis and Clark were asked to report on the likelihood of developing an efficient line of communication to the Pacific that would link the United States to potential markets in East Asia, and channel the fur trade of the Pacific Northeast into the Mississippi Valley. Of more immediate concern, Jefferson wanted the port of New Orleans and its hinterland for American commerce. ‘I would not give one inch of the waters of the Mississippi to any nation’, he remarked.<sup>16</sup> Reflecting his fears of the impact of the Napoleonic Wars on the issue of American naval and commercial security, Jefferson preferred Spanish control to that of the stronger French.

The other serious concern was security of the homeland – the safeguarding of the nation against further foreign meddling. Jefferson wished

to create a space for alternative expansion that would not in future duplicate the conflicts of the Atlantic market economy; this strategy rested on the yeoman farmer dream recreated in the spaces of the west. Territorial acquisition would enable the United States to avoid the Malthusian trap of Europe – the pressures of European population growth that must inevitably affect American security and social stability. Jefferson saw that the laws of Thomas Malthus on population did not apply to the United States within the foreseeable future, so long as there was an area of land in which to expand.<sup>17</sup>

This site of expansion required more than land pure and simple, however. It required the removal of any opportunity for European nations to interfere in the taking of territory from American Indians. Jefferson was particularly worried about alliances between foreign powers and the surviving tribes. A ‘central concern’ of Jefferson’s Indian policy, as set forth in his first presidential message to Congress, was ‘to prevent the encircling British, Spanish, and French from subverting the all-too-corruptible savages and inciting them to war against the frontiers of the United States’. Jefferson noted to Governor William Henry Harrison on February 27, 1803 that the renewed French presence was ‘already felt like a light breeze by the Indians’. Under ‘the hope of their protection they will immediately stiffen against cessions of land to us’.<sup>18</sup>

The Louisiana Purchase was one prong in Jefferson’s policy for the Valley. A related one was the removal of the Indian threat in existing territory as a prelude to further US expansion. Prior to the acquisition of the French territory, Jefferson wanted to complete the removal of Indians from east of the Mississippi in order ‘to be prepared against the occupation of Louisiana by a powerful and enterprising people’.<sup>19</sup> Removal would simultaneously allay fears of European–Indian alliances, and create a homogeneous population loyal to the American Republic. This empire of liberty had no place for other racial groups. Jefferson could not tolerate in the expansion of American population any ‘blot or mixture’<sup>20</sup>; he was advocating an ethnic homeland – based on a two-edged policy of assimilation and/or driving the Indians out. Historical anthropologist Anthony F. C. Wallace describes Jefferson’s civilizing program as a form of ‘cultural genocide’, but the strategy of removal by sale or force could also be called ‘ethnic cleansing’.<sup>21</sup> ‘The empire of liberty’, John Murrin observes, was ‘for whites only’.<sup>22</sup> Any other group, especially the Indians in view of their long history of skilful military alliances with foreign powers, would always be a potential fifth column within the United States or a meddlesome force adjacent to it.

In the *Federalist Papers* Jefferson’s ally James Madison had, in 1787–88, faced arguments first raised by Enlightenment thinkers such as Montesquieu that popular government was incompatible with an extensive territory. In a clever addition to political theory, Madison responded that the geography of federalism would actually enhance vital political

checks and balances by rendering the republic more regionally complex.<sup>23</sup> In power as President from 1801, Jefferson conceded that geographical expansion might indeed accentuate centrifugal tendencies, but argued that it would not matter if the Louisiana Purchase eventually spawned separate nations to the west because these would be members of the same family of liberty. Even if not united, the ‘future inhabitants of [both] the Atlantic and Missipi [*sic*] States’ would ‘be our sons’.<sup>24</sup> Fears of regional fragmentation could be countered by stressing the duplication of self-determination *within* a federal system. Jefferson’s dream of national loyalty buttressed by liberty depended on the rapid admittance of new territories to self-government within the Union. Behind the deeply felt belief in the superiority of this form of government was the need for national security. As Peter Onuf puts it, ‘political self-determination on the periphery of Jefferson’s empire would cement western loyalties, preempting separatist alliances with America’s enemies’.<sup>25</sup>

Jefferson skilfully exploited the divisions within the European presence to consolidate the new American possessions. His refusal to supply support for the French army in Haiti from 1802 to 1804 ‘was probably’, states John Murrin, ‘a necessary precondition for Haitian independence’, but his ‘primary motive’ was to negate Napoleon’s influence. By 1806, the tables had turned. Jefferson was willing to place severe sanctions on Haiti in return for French assistance in acquiring Spanish West Florida. Here Jefferson used one European power against another.<sup>26</sup> But Jeffersonians did not rely wholly upon diplomacy. They exploited local conditions in which disgruntled American settlers seized Baton Rouge in 1810 and proclaimed West Florida as part of the American Republic.<sup>27</sup> Viewed from the perspective of day-to-day diplomatic and military correspondence, such independent local action was a chaotic and uncertain process. Nevertheless, it served functionally as an adjunct to ‘national policy, a way to expand the national borders of the United States into Spanish territory without waging an actual war’.<sup>28</sup>

Despite the long-term importance of the Louisiana Purchase, attention should not be focused too heavily upon North American geo-politics. For the United States, the Atlantic remained the major source of interest, where the seamen of many nations as well as pirates operated in the eighteenth century. That plebeian mingling created inevitable transnational exchanges in which the culture of seafaring people spread around the port cities of the Caribbean, North America and Europe. On the ships of the Atlantic trade, people of many different ethnic and racial groups mixed freely and switched national allegiances.<sup>29</sup> If this intra-oceanic community influenced American culture, American economic and strategic interests also pointed across the Atlantic, not towards the western American states. It is significant that the first American military deployment abroad was in the Mediterranean, where the US Navy fought against the Barbary pirates’ interference with commerce. The American Marines’ famous song

did not contain the phrase 'To the Shores of Tripoli' for nothing, because US forces had seen action along the coast of North Africa from 1801 to 1805, when Jefferson ordered an end to monetary tributes exacted by the region's rulers against commercial shipping. So important was the region thought to be that successive administrations kept a Mediterranean naval squadron on patrol. Not until the 1830s, when the French takeover of Algeria extended European sovereignty in North Africa did the American military deployment diminish.<sup>30</sup>

These 'small wars' loomed large at the time in American culture, but larger still was the renewed threat of war with either Britain or France. In a letter of July 1803 to French friend Pierre Cabanis, Jefferson noted: 'Our distance enables us' to pursue peace, while France was 'again at war'. But the president recognized interdependency when he added the hope that the United States should 'be *permitted* to run the race of peace'. Here he conceded the continuing threat, as American policy was not entirely a matter of its own making, but depended upon the role of Great Britain as its titanic struggle with the French resumed.<sup>31</sup> The American nation could easily be drawn into this conflict. And so it was. The Embargo of 1807 against trade with the European belligerents in response to the threats to American commerce posed by the British Navy showed that despite the gain of Louisiana, the realities of American policy still led east. The War of 1812 was part of the last play in the great struggle for world supremacy between Napoleon and the British Empire. The United States was drawn into this conflict principally in reaction over impressment of American sailors by the British, and in defence of maritime rights for neutrals. President Madison put this argument strongly in his declaration of war against Britain in 1812.

Control of North America was also at stake in the friction; western representatives supporting the administration wanted to conquer Canada. Why? Because they craved security against Indian attacks and a possible British invasion? Or for a sordid land grab? Evidence for the latter motive before the war began is inconclusive, but American settlers and their representatives believed that the British had intrigued with Indian tribes to strengthen the prospect of an Indian confederacy on the American North-west border. These Indians alone stood in the way of further land acquisitions by American settlers, and Indian restiveness was mounting. Across the old Northwest from Ohio to Wisconsin, Tecumseh, the Shawnee Prophet had nurtured a messianic religion aimed at the overthrow of European civilization through a revitalized Indian nation. He had already clashed with the Americans at the Battle of Tippecanoe (1811), where forces under William Henry Harrison were victorious. Independent existence and survival for the Indians now depended even more on alignment with the British. The irreconcilable conflict between Indian desires to remain on their land and the pressures of western expansion led the North-western tribes to fight with the British after the War of 1812 was declared.

When Tecumseh was killed at the Battle of the Thames on October 5, 1813, however, the Indian confederacy fell apart.

Badly bruised though the United States was in the military conflict with Britain, the war confirmed American independence and ended Indian power in the old Northwest. Typically, the peace treaty that followed has been marked as the beginning of a long period of inward looking by Americans. Yet the conflict exposed American vulnerability. The invading British had burned the city of Washington and Americans suffered more casualties than their opponents. The war had not been won, though it had not been lost either. Also exposed was continued internal disunity with the Federalists opposing the war at their Hartford Convention in 1814. Their inability to influence the outcome contributed to their decline as their dissent was associated with treason. Most important, the war enhanced Americans' concern about their armed forces and the nation's security.

Despite the internal dissension, the period of the embargo and the War of 1812 helped solidify the economic and military lineaments of national power. These years saw the early development of American manufacturing industry in the Northeast. The conflicts with Europe encouraged import substitution and served as a *de facto* tariff. Soon after the war the Jeffersonian Republicans abandoned ideological opposition to a national bank and chartered the Second Bank of the United States as an agent of economic development in 1816. The war not only spurred the creation of manufacturing industry and the growth of finance but also increased defence spending – the army remained bigger after the war than before, and expenditure on national roads grew as a way of improving national security.

Jefferson could never be free of Europe, intellectually or politically, and neither, at least for political and military affairs, could James Madison during his presidency from 1809 to 1817, or Madison's successor James Monroe. He proclaimed the Monroe Doctrine, warning European powers against interference in hemispheric affairs, but the War of 1812 left a legacy of anxiety over the nation's borders and its defence. Andrew Jackson in the 1830s and Zachary Taylor, president from 1849 to 1850, were among the veterans of the war who subsequently emphasized a strong American defence as the key to American security. They had learned their lesson in the decades of revolution and military service. Though Americans could turn after 1815 to the task of internal nation building, their leaders would always have to consider, as Monroe did, that the American security position depended on a *Pax Britannica*. Domestic debates came by the 1830s to dominate politics, yet these debates sprang nonetheless from political, social and economic changes that were transatlantic in scope. The spread of democracy, the inception of social reform, and the market revolution that characterized the era from the 1810s to the 1850s were not American phenomena alone. The fates of Americans remained intertwined with the wider world. The key to those changes was the economy.

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