

**FOREIGN INFLUENCE: THOMAS JEFFERSON
AND THE THINKERS OF THE FRENCH REVOLUTIONARY ERA**

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ABSTRACT

The American Revolution of 1776 and French Revolution of 1789 have long been associated with each other, both by historians and popularly. The two events resulted from highly similar causes: they were the responses of two enraged populaces to the overbearing, unjust, and oppressive rule of their respective governments. The two also similarly grew out of the body of recent socio-political thinking that had arisen during the Age of Enlightenment, spurred by thinkers such as Locke, Rousseau, Bacon, Hobbes, and Descartes, centered largely around newly developed political precepts including equality of persons, sovereignty of the populace rather than the monarch, representative government, and fundamental human rights. Rather than merely being largely independent manifestations of that collection of politico-philosophical thought, the two movements substantially were directly connected in a number of significant ways. One of the primary and most significant direct links was provided by Thomas Jefferson.

Jefferson's central role and immense contribution to the American effort is, of course, axiomatic; his contributions to and influence on the proceedings in France, while far less well recognized and remembered popularly, were substantive nonetheless. Jefferson was neither the cause nor the catalyst for the eruption of events in France, but his words and actions provided considerable influence in the shaping of that process, in

ways both direct and indirect. Jefferson's writings prior to and during the American movement, particularly the *Declaration of Independence*, were widely known in France and inspirational to significant portions of the French populace. On an even more immediate and direct basis, Jefferson spent the five years leading up to the outbreak of the French Revolution, in Paris as American minister plenipotentiary to France. During that time, he corresponded and met regularly with a number of the principal French leaders of factions driving for political reform, including Lafayette, Condorcet, La Rochefoucauld, and Mirabeau, advising and influencing them in a wide variety of matters of social and political philosophy and governance.

Jefferson's influence may be seen in the fact that many of the reform demands that were made, and principals that were espoused by reformers, mirrored American precepts in general, and his own in particular. The echoes between the principles expressed in the French *Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen*, and its predecessor, Jefferson's American *Declaration*, for example, are numerous. In return, Jefferson was himself significantly influenced by his time in France – by the nature of the situation, the conditions endured by the populace, and the ideas of his French counterparts – experiences which would prove over time to contribute to the shaping of his own socio-political beliefs and actions throughout the remainder of his political career. The two revolutions were by no means entirely disconnected affairs, but were substantively linked to each other – particularly through the personal presence of Thomas Jefferson in each movement – in spirit, in principles, in accomplishment, and in significant degrees of reciprocal influence on each other.

DEDICATION

This paper is dedicated to all those wonderful people who supported this entire endeavor, making sacrifices and enduring upheaval so that it could happen; and especially to Christopher. My gratitude and admiration are endless.

Further acknowledgements go to the splendid faculty at Georgetown University, with particular thanks to Anne Ridder of the Graduate Liberal Studies Program, and Professor James Hershman.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

It is difficult to conceive of the American Revolution – and the ensuing constructing of the American system of government – unfolding in the manner in which they each did, without the involvement of Thomas Jefferson. This is a familiar notion to nearly anyone familiar with the history of the American Revolutionary Era. Far less widely known and appreciated was the fact that Jefferson’s influence on the French Revolution was in certain ways, albeit mostly indirectly, also of immense significance. Furthermore, Jefferson’s experiences during his years stationed in France would also prove to influence him in return.

Ever the philosophical reappraiser, much in the way that he was noted for being a scientific tinkerer, Jefferson showed a penchant throughout his life for constant political and philosophical observation, adjustment, and refinement. His views on such areas as society, humanity, politics, government, never reached any place of unchanging stasis, but were always subject to revision, based on new information, new experiences, or new ideas that he encountered, or merely from a reevaluation of a previous perspective. It is one of the qualities that most makes him such a fascinating subject of study.

What forms a leader’s beliefs? What entities combine to create the perspectives and values that shape his or her essential outlook on the world, an outlook which will inevitably prove to play a major role in the policies and actions which that leader takes while in office? The immediate answer is obvious: the sum total of that person’s experiences in life – the events he’s witnessed, the books she’s read, the speeches he’s

heard, the personal triumphs and failures she's lived through, the successes and adversities he's endured, the friendships and alliances and enmities formed, the role models she's been fortunate to have, the socio-political and economic needs of society that have arisen around him – all coalesce, along with innumerable other occurrences large and small, in some logical or haphazard manner, to shape a set of beliefs. Those beliefs, mingled with assessment of the society's political needs of the moment, largely shape that leader's actions. Yet such an answer, while obvious and to a considerable extent true, also stands rather as a platitude when attempting to understand the perspective of a particular leader; it's true, but it doesn't really say much. We want to know more, in more concrete, detailed terms. We ask, how exactly did *this* leader's beliefs form? For a leader as immensely complex, and in some ways enigmatic, as Thomas Jefferson, such an explanation will be similarly complex, and quite likely will eternally defy an indisputably definitive, comprehensive answer. What we can do is examine various aspects of his character as it is recorded, his writings, his actions during his different political offices, those of his life experiences that are known, and attempt to shed some illumination on at least some portions of the overall picture, even knowing that the entirety will likely never be fully clear.

A. Significance of Jefferson's Time in France

Among the many different episodes of Jefferson's remarkable life that stand as significant, in this context must be counted the period from 1784 to 1789 that he spent in France. Jefferson was in his mature forties during these years, already a veteran statesman having served terms in Congress and as Virginia's governor, and of course one

of the foremost intellectual and political figures of the American Revolutionary Era and framers of the nation's founding; it would be easy to conclude that such a man would already have reached the point where the forming of his philosophical and political views was essentially fully complete. But much historical evidence suggests that Jefferson was not one who ever reached any such state of unchanging intellectual finality. Throughout the entirety of his life he continued to read, to learn, to discuss ideas and beliefs with other leading political and intellectual figures, to think in new ways, to consider new perspectives, to impart and receive influence from other minds and life experiences, to continually adjust the ways in which he saw and understood the world. His time and experiences in France certainly stand as significant among the numerous key periods in his life in which continued this process of constant observing and learning, influencing and being influenced, thinking and revising his views.

Intellectually Jefferson gained much indeed from his stay in France; he gave considerably as well. His perspectives were indubitably influenced by the dramatic events of the French Revolutionary Era occurring around him, by the philosophical ideas that were in the air in the day, by his interactions with other leading philosophical and political thinkers of the period with whom he corresponded and had extensive discussions. His own views, conversely, also would prove to have significant influence on the milieu, the thinkers and political leaders around him, and to some considerable extent even on the French Revolutionary movement as a whole.

The aim of this paper is to trace these reciprocal influences – both those of Jefferson on the figures and events of the Era, as well as their effect on his own views –

to identify and characterize them, and also to examine ways in which those influences manifested themselves through playing some role in his subsequent actions in later years. Such influences were both substantial and long-lived indeed, as one noted Jeffersonian historian has characterized, “Jefferson’s obsession with the idea of the French Revolution as a validation of American ideals would fester long after he left Paris.”¹ Jefferson’s complex and occasionally enigmatic nature may present difficulty to the historian, making him rather challenging to fully understand and explain at times, but the enormous body of correspondence that he left behind presents an equally sizable benefit as a resource to anyone who studies him. The Founders Online section of the National Archives alone lists nearly 18,000 pieces written by Jefferson, and over 23,000 received by him² – an immensely rich vein of material to plunder for information and from which to gain insight into his sometimes labyrinthine character. Analysis of relevant parts of that correspondence will be a key primary source on which this paper will rely, along with correspondence written by other figures to Jefferson, and secondary historical works on Jefferson and the French Revolutionary Era as well.

Jefferson’s interlude in France from 1784 to 1789 did not rank as perhaps the most spectacularly noteworthy episode in his career as one of the foremost statesmen and historical figures of the entirety of the American saga, and certainly not from the perspective of his record of tangible political accomplishments, yet it is a period that stands nevertheless remarkably revealing of his personal character, priorities, and overall

¹ William Howard Adams, *The Paris Years of Thomas Jefferson* (New Haven, Ct.: Yale University Press, 1997), 6.

² Founders Online (Washington, D.C.: United States National Archives and Records Administration), [accessed 14 October 2014], <http://founders.archives.gov/>.

socio-political-philosophic outlook on the world. His time in France was “one of the most creative and personally significant periods of his life.”³ It allowed him to engage in an enormous quantity of remarkable cultural, artistic, and intellectual experiences, reflecting the immense variety of his personal interests. It accorded him countless opportunities to conduct exchanges of political, social, and philosophical views with some of the greatest lights of the Enlightenment period. Such exchanges were critical, as revealed through his vast correspondence and other writings, to the constant process of evolution of his own thoughts and beliefs, particularly regarding philosophies of government, that continued whenever new ideas, facts, perspectives, or other kinds of information became available to him – an evolutionary process indicative of the scientific bent of his mind, wherein most anything was open to a process of experiment and reevaluation. And the entire experience in France, and his personal reactions to it, reflected the multifaceted, sometimes seemingly self-contradictory, nature of his personality – one which preferred certain aspects of simply country life, but was indifferent to others, which was drawn to certain facets usually common only to the higher strata of society, but rejected other elements of the same as well.

B. Jefferson Departs America for France

Jefferson had turned down two previous opportunities to be stationed in France. In 1776 he decided to remain at home due to his wife Martha’s continuing ill health, and in 1781 he also elected to stay stateside, this time to defend his reputation as wartime

³ R. B. Bernstein, *Thomas Jefferson* (London: Oxford University Press, 2003), 54.

governor of Virginia when it came under official inquiry by the Virginia Assembly.⁴ Martha's death in September of 1782 was a primary catalyst for what would become Jefferson's posting to Paris. The passing of his deeply beloved wife resulted in far more than typical bereavement, but plunged him into a profound and prolonged depression, as he first kept to his room for weeks like a recluse, sleeping on the floor, then "took to riding aimlessly about the countryside on his horse, trying to bring his violent grief under control."⁵ As Jefferson's inconsolable depression continued on for weeks and weeks afterwards, many of his friends, including John Adams, Edmund Randolph, and James Madison, became deeply concerned for his welfare. Fearing that he might in fact be suicidal, they came to believe that perhaps sending him to France might take his mind off her loss and rejuvenate him, and moved to have him once again posted there.⁶ Jefferson later told Gouverneur Morris that the loss of Martha was "the only circumstance which could have brought me to Europe."⁷ Jefferson was appointed minister plenipotentiary to France in November of 1782, to join Benjamin Franklin, John Jay, and John Adams for the task of completing the peace negotiations with the British. Jefferson's arrival in France was delayed for two years, however, first because a provisional peace treaty with Britain was concluded prior to his departure from the U.S., then because he was elected to Congress by the Virginia Assembly to head the delegation revising the Virginia

⁴ Adams, *The Paris Years of Thomas Jefferson*, 26.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁶ Merrill D. Peterson, *Thomas Jefferson and the New Nation* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), 290.

⁷ Gouverneur Morris, *The Diary of the French Revolution*, vol. 1, ed. Beatrix C. Davenport (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1939), 259.

Constitution. He was reappointed minister plenipotentiary to France by Congress in May of 1784, this time to replace Jay, to work alongside Franklin and Adams in negotiating a variety of trade and political treaties and arrangements with France and other European powers. Jefferson finally arrived in France in August of 1784.

CHAPTER 2

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Jefferson landed in 1784 in a society that was, of course, rapidly nearing the brink of explosion. Few at the time, if indeed any, would have been genuinely able to accurately prophesy the full extent of the societal upheaval and mass violence that would unfold in France over the ensuing decade. Yet the tension in the air was palpable already, even with the onset of the actual revolution itself still some five years off.

A. Events During Jefferson's Years in France

It may have seemed to the French political leadership of the day that the episodes of social disruption that occurred sporadically throughout the late 1780s were little more than the sorts of fairly typical peasant revolts, or rabble-rousing unrest among the urban poor, that had always cropped up from time to time in a society still essentially feudal – unpleasant perhaps, but relatively insignificant in import, minor inconveniences for the authorities, nothing much to worry over. Such instances were always quelled relatively easily by the authorities and the forces of the militia or army, with life returned quickly to the ongoing status quo. Louis XVI had a tendency to treat such apparently inconsequential outbursts with such indifference that he would simply ignore them, leave them to be handled by his government, and instead head off on his favorite pastime, hunting. History has of course shown us that these episodes during these particular years were not in fact merely the usual meaningless occasional flare-ups of always, but rather were the symptoms of the combination of forces and factors that were driving the nation inexorably to apocalypse, and the monarchy to its downfall. This paper is not the

appropriate venue for an exhaustive examination of the full range of events that preceded and brought about the French Revolution, however it is relevant to enumerate at least the major incidents that arose during Jefferson's time in France, as they were key to the influence the entire stay had on him.

Table 1. Principal Events of the French Revolutionary Era During Jefferson's Time in France¹

<u>1785</u>	
October	Finance Minister Charles de Calonne attempts fiscal reforms to rescue failing royal finances
<u>1786</u>	
May	<i>Affaire du Collier</i> discredits monarchy, increases popular resentment
August 20	Calonne proposes new tax code to stave off insolvency of royal treasury
December 29	Assembly of Notables (<i>Assemblée des Notables</i>) convoked
<u>1787</u>	
February 22	First Assembly of Notables convenes
March	Calonne and Assembly of Notables reach impasse
April 8	Calonne dismissed by Louis XVI
April 30	Étienne-Charles de Loménie de Brienne appointed chief minister of state
May 25	First Assembly of Notables dissolved
June	Brienne sends tax reform legislation to the <i>Parlements</i>
July 2	<i>Parlement de Paris</i> rejects Brienne reforms
August 6	Brienne reforms passed by <i>lit de justice</i> (effective royal decree); <i>Parlement de Paris</i> rejects reforms, begins criminal proceedings against Calonne
August 15	Louis XVI dismisses <i>Parlement de Paris</i>
August 19	Louis XVI orders closure of all political clubs in Paris
September	Brienne settles for extension of current <i>vingtième</i> taxation system
November 19	Louis XVI contravenes actions of <i>Parlement de Paris</i>
<u>1788</u>	
May 6	Two members of <i>Parlement de Paris</i> arrested by royal order; <i>Parlement</i> declares solidarity with the arrested members

¹ William Doyle, *The Oxford History of the French Revolution*, 2nd Ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 436-437.

May 8	Judicial reforms abolish many powers of the <i>Parlements</i> via <i>lit de justice</i>
June 7	Day of the Tiles (<i>Journée des Tuiles</i>) in Grenoble called to assemble new <i>Parlement</i> in defiance of royal order; suppressed by military
June	Widespread outcry over royal reforms, many <i>Parlements</i> refuse to sit
July 5	Brienne begins to consider calling Estates-General (<i>États-Généraux</i>)
July 20	Assembly of Vizille meets to elect members for Estates-General, adopts measures to increase influence of the Third Estate (<i>Tiers État</i>)
August 8	Brienne informed that royal treasury is empty, sets May 1, 1789 as prospective date for opening of Estates-General
August 16	French government effectively declares bankruptcy, stops loan repayments
August 25	Brienne resigns, replaced by Jacques Necker, favored by the Third Estate
November 6	Second Assembly of Notables convenes to discuss Estates-General
December 12	Second Assembly of Notables dismissed, refused to consider increasing representation for the Third Estate
December 27	Necker announces doubling of representation for the Third Estate
<u>1789</u>	
April 28	<i>Réveillon</i> riots in Paris, caused by low wages and food shortages
May 5	Estates-General meets for first time since 1614, announces voting to be by estate rather than by head
May 28	Third Estate begins holding separate meetings
June 17	Third Estate declares itself the National Assembly (<i>Assemblée Nationale</i>)
June 20	Third Estate produces Oath of the Tennis Court (<i>Serment du Jeu de Paume</i>), vowing not to dissolve until establishment of a constitution for the nation
June 24	Many from First and Second Estates defect to side with Third Estate
June 27	Louis XVI recognizes National Assembly
July	Riots spread across France, sacking monasteries and homes of nobility
July 11	Necker dismissed by Louis XVI
July 14	Bastille stormed, troops occupy Paris
July 16	Necker recalled, troops removed from Paris

July 17	<i>La Grande Peur</i> , widening peasant revolts against feudalism
August 4	August Decrees abolish feudalism
August 26	<i>Declaration of Rights of Man and of the Citizen (Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen)</i> adopted by National Assembly
September 11	Louis XVI refuses to ratify actions of National Assembly
October 5-6	Further riots widespread across Paris; March on Versailles; Versailles stormed; Louis XVI forcibly relocated to Paris
October 8	Jefferson leaves France

Source: Doyle, *Oxford History of the French Revolution*, 436-437.

A simple scan of this list of events easily reveals both the increasingly chaotic overall nature of the era, and also those various particular factors that were driving the process down its path to cataclysm. Certain points along the way were watershed moments, where steps could have been taken that might have diverted affairs to a far different course and produced a different outcome. One key example is as follows:

The Assembly [of Notables in 1787] was a turning point. It marked the beginning of a political crisis that was only to be resolved by revolution. Convoled to deal with hitherto unacknowledged financial problems, its three-month sitting revealed in rare detail to the country and to the world how serious they were. The effect was to throw public doubt on the capacity of absolute monarchy to manage the nation's affairs, and to encourage subsequent resistance to any measures the Crown might propose.²

As the true import of such moments went largely unrecognized by the affair's major participants at the time, the hurtling towards cataclysm became an inevitability.

While there are many different ways that the French Revolution, and particularly its causes, may be interpreted and understood, one simple and effective method is to see those causes as fitting within three groupings: some immediate material factors that

² Doyle, *Oxford History of the French Revolution*, 75.

directly brought the government and nation to a state of crisis, a number of long-term factors that were rooted in the essential structure of the society and in the way its government functioned, and some of the broader philosophical and political ideas that had arisen during the overall Age of Enlightenment and which were coalescing into systems of belief and active political positions. These different elements were combining in various ways throughout these pre-Revolution years to produce the components that would eventually erupt into full-scale turmoil and revolution: the periodic flare-ups of open hostility, such as popular riots most often caused by chronic food shortages and anger over taxes, the increasingly chronic instability and crisis in government, the formation of political factions and forces in growing opposition and antagonism towards each other, the increasingly generalized resentment of the populace towards authority and the privileged classes, and the constantly strengthening atmosphere of almost tangible tension. France during these years, and especially Paris, stands as a quintessential example of a society transforming itself into a powder keg merely awaiting a spark. The historian William Howard Adams described the atmosphere in Paris during the latter stages of Jefferson's time there:

The city was tense. For weeks bakery shops had been guarded by troops rushed to trouble spots. In his last official report to John Jay, the American secretary for foreign affairs, Jefferson wrote that "civil war" – the word revolution had not yet entered conversations – was widely talked about and expected.³

This situation was most fertile ground for any individual who is taken with the burgeoning philosophical ideas of the day and by the examination of the various different

³ Adams, *The Paris Years of Thomas Jefferson*, 3.

ways – both good and bad – in which society may be structured and ruled, and who even has a turn for a bit of political intrigue. Thomas Jefferson certainly held all those characteristics, and as such, the time and scene in which he found himself could not have been anything but one of considerable excitement and fascination to him. “Jefferson fell under the spell of Paris,” as one historian put it, “the moment he set foot on its vaunted scene” on August 6, 1784.⁴

B. Immediate Direct Causes Leading to Crisis in France

A handful of material causes led directly to the crisis in which the French government and society overall would find themselves. For the government, the critical factor was the increasingly dire state of the royal finances. Too little income and far too great spending – driven largely by monarchical extravagance, decades of ruinously expensive warfare against other nations (notably including the financing of the American Revolution against the British), and over-extensive borrowing – had pushed the monarchy to bankruptcy, forcing the calling of the Estates-General for the first time in nearly two centuries, the action that ultimately would open the door for the onset of the Revolution proper.

By the fall of 1786, Calonne realized that the fast redemption schedule on the loans taken out by the government during the American Revolution was partly responsible for the worsening financial situation. The annual deficit stood at over 100 million francs, and repayment of the debt had grown to an alarming 250 million a year.⁵

Societally, ever-building resentment among the mass of the populace of France towards the monarchy, and the privileged classes in general, was the product of

⁴ Ibid., 37.

⁵ Ibid., 259.

widespread anger over rates and means of taxation, over the frequent food shortages of the era, and by the longstanding existence of political, social, and economic abuse in general suffered at the hands of the privileged. “Poverty was France’s most visible social problem. Nobody could overlook it. All travelers noticed the misery of rural housing, and the poor appearance of the peasantry.”⁶ The winter of 1788-1789 was particularly gruesome in Paris, with privation widespread: “in April 1789, a late thaw finally ended the devastating winter that had killed off countless people living, homeless and starving, in the streets of the capital.”⁷ Serious difficulties assuring sufficient quantities of food for the populace, at prices they could afford, occurred repeatedly, with a number of government plans for solving the challenges repeatedly failing. Harvest sizes were notoriously unreliable, resulting in enormous fluctuations from year to year in availability of basic foodstuffs, particularly of grain, with consequential variances in prices. The winter of 1788-1789 was especially dire, leading to deep anger among much of the populace, particularly in urban areas, towards the government.

Steep rises in the price of grain, flour, and bread posed serious problems for that vast majority of Frenchmen who were wage-earners. In normal times bread absorbed anything between a third and a half of an urban worker’s wage, and from landless agricultural labourers it might take even more. As prices climbed over the spring of 1789 the proportion rose to two-thirds for the best-off and perhaps even nine-tenths for the worst.⁸

Particularly enraging to much of the populace were the actions of the notoriously invasive, rapacious, merciless tax collectors, known collectively as the Tax Farm.

⁶ Doyle, *Oxford History of the French Revolution*, 14.

⁷ Adams, *The Paris Years of Thomas Jefferson*, 273.

⁸ Doyle, *Oxford History of the French Revolution*, 86.

In collecting taxes for the crown, it is estimated that the Farm assigned more than twenty thousand armed personnel to police each jurisdiction and the commodities produced there, notably salt from the marshes of Brittany. This paramilitary cadre, reaching into every village throughout the country, had the right to enter, search, and confiscate any property or household considered suspicious. Mercier called the Farm an “infernal machine which seizes each citizen by the throat and pumps out his blood.”⁹

The aristocracy had almost unlimited rights, great wealth and luxury, great privilege, were politically dominant, and paid little to no taxes; common people had few rights, little security, extensive poverty, high taxation, little if any political power or voice, and were becoming increasingly angry about all of it. One may see these different factors reflected in the events listed in Table 1 above, in the repeated attempts of Calonne and Brienne to enact fiscal reform and the subsequent bankruptcy of the monarchy, in the multiple instances of popular riots, and in the various political actions of the Third Estate (commoners) aimed at stymieing or even wresting greater power away from the monarchy and the first two Estates.

C. Political Factors of the Era

The long-term factors that were the principal overall forces driving the material immediate crises experienced in France during the era were deeply rooted in the nature of the fundamental structure of the society, in certain ways in which that structure had been undergoing some fundamental changes, and in the manner in which the government was constituted and operated. Like most of Europe at the time, France in the 18th century was, at its core, fundamentally still a feudal society, a social structure largely unchanged since far back in the Middle Ages. The privileged classes, known in France as the

⁹ Adams, *The Paris Years of Thomas Jefferson*, 45.

Premier État (the clergy, of whom the higher ranks were almost exclusively made up of nobles) and the *Deuxième État* (the nobility), though together comprising but 3% of the population, overwhelmingly dominated the society politically, economically, and socially. Social mobility between classes, especially upward, was all but nonexistent. Ages-old feudal obligations of the commoners to the nobility were still in existence and largely enforced. Political power was almost entirely controlled by the first two Estates, through rank, privilege, wealth, influence, prestige, legal status and rights, and effective monopolies on all significant governmental and religious offices. The Estates-General – essentially France’s antiquated, poor excuse for a national legislative body – was organized into three orders, rather than by any sort of proportional representation, with all voting conducted by bloc, thus the First and Second Estates were always able to combine to prevail over the Third – an ages-old practice that those two dominating blocs fully expected and insisted would continue with the new calling of the Estates-General.

By the ancient ground rules favoring the status quo, voting in the reconvened Estates-General was to be by bloc, each of the three orders making its decisions separately. By virtues of their greater numbers, the nobility and clergy... would of course be masters of the show.¹⁰

The Third Estate, representing the 97% mass of the French population, was effectively disenfranchised and powerless. Such an archaic societal composition was, of course, bitterly and increasingly resented by the majority of the French people, and ultimately was untenable. The intransigence of the First and Second Estates concerning these arrangements would ultimately prove to provide one of the principal sparks setting off the revolution. Leading into the reconvening of the Estates-General in 1789, the

¹⁰ Ibid., 270.

“Third Estate assumed that delegates would vote individually rather than by orders, a misunderstanding that led directly to the Oath of the Tennis Court less than a year later”.¹¹

The government itself, essentially the preserve of the privileged few, was structured in equally archaic fashion, and had long been run largely by incompetence and corruption, both procedurally and in personnel. Furthermore, the long dominance of the First and Second Estates over political decisions had left France with a system of taxation that was doubly egregious and unsustainable: it exempted most of the privileged classes from most taxation, thereby placing the bulk of the burden of taxation on the already largely impoverished commoners, and it did not provide the crown with enough revenue to maintain solvency – a perversely backwards system “which taxed a productive middle class while exempting the unproductive but wealthy nobility and clergy.”¹² The poor were being taxed to death, and the monarchy was going broke. In the events shown in Table 1 above, one may also easily see reflected – particularly in the repeated changing of chief government ministers and in the multiple instances of the reversing of decisions and actions taken by the government and monarchy – the enormous instability of the French government during this period of time. Collapse was nearing.

In May 1788, Jefferson confirmed to Moustier [Éléonor-François-Elie, Comte de Moustier, French Ambassador to the United States 1787-1790] the rumor that the desperate king was planning to call the Estates-General, on the heels of a series of disturbances in Paris and the provinces. “The public mind is manifestly advancing on the abusive prerogatives of their governors, and bearing them down,” he reported to the king’s American

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Lawrence S. Kaplan, *Jefferson and France: An Essay on Politics and Political Ideas* (New Haven, Ct.: Yale University Press, 1967), 31.

representative in Philadelphia. “No force in the government can withstand this in the long run.”¹³

The final major factor of the era centered on the changing composition of the Third Estate. While the major portion of the French population continued to be made up of impoverished peasants throughout the countryside, who were little more than serfs, and equally impoverished urban wage laborers, two other sectors were emerging. Some free peasants had gained ownership of their land and achieved at least some degree of prosperity; the high taxes they were forced to pay (the *taille*, or land tax was the most onerous and reviled) increasingly infuriated them, particularly in light of their corresponding lack of political rights. And (principally) in the cities, the *bourgeoisie* had begun to flourish, achieving considerable rises in prosperity, ownership, and social prestige – they’d begun to erode some of the power of the nobility, especially economically, and were demanding far more political voice, power, and rights.

Ensnared in their positions of wealth, power, and privilege, the First and Second Estates steadfastly resisted political reform, especially any encroachment on their exemption from paying taxes. Thus by the late 18th century, the bulk of the society of France had become comprised of two primary forces – enormously disproportionally balanced in size in one direction, and in power in the other – diametrically opposed to each other, and approaching similar degrees of near-complete intransigence, thereby setting the conditions needed for the explosion that would arrive in due course.

¹³ Adams, *The Paris Years of Thomas Jefferson*, 267.

D. Philosophical Developments of the Broader Age

The body of newly emerging philosophical ideas of the overall Age of Enlightenment did much to provide conceptual shape for the developing political perspectives of the era, as well as considerable theoretical justification for much of the socio-political reforms that were being demanded. The Age of Enlightenment, stretching from the late 17th to the early 19th centuries, of course gained that moniker largely due to the mass of immensely significant thinkers who arose during the period, many of them with trailblazing, even revolutionary ideas, making enormous effects upon and advances within their respective fields. We must of course count the many advances of titanic figures such as Newton and Lavoisier, for example, as groundbreaking within their scientific disciplines. The most extensive degrees of intellectual influence and accomplishment of the Age, however, undoubtedly came within the realm of philosophy, with those of political philosophy standing among the foremost. Building upon foundations laid in the previous century by thinkers such as Descartes, Hobbes, and Spinoza, the 18th century was all but inundated by some of the titans of philosophy making major philosophical advancements one after another, including Locke, Hume, Kant, Goethe, Adam Smith, Paine, Benjamin Franklin and Jefferson himself among Americans, and certainly the French *philosophes*, among whom Voltaire, Rousseau, Montesquieu, and Diderot stood perhaps most prominent.

So much of what still forms the foundations and essences of our political systems to this day emerged from this era, that one is tempted to call it the cradle of modern political philosophy. Along with a considerable debt to some of the major Platonic and

Aristotelian principles of Antiquity, the great majority of the basic political tenets and beliefs upon which Western societies are still constructed today came from the age: the right purpose, structure, functioning, and justification of government, the proper structure of society, the fundamental rights of humans and the inalienability of those rights, the necessity for consent of the governed to be governed, the fundamental equality of individuals, the discrediting of absolute monarchy, among many others. The views and writings of the political philosophers of the period were either the outright origin of such principles, or did much to develop them extensively, or both.

It is within this intellectual, philosophical realm, of course, that the American and French Revolutions most greatly overlapped and held most in common with each other, as each was essentially born out of the same set of principles and politico-philosophical advances. The written works of many of the prominent philosophers of the age were often (although not always) widely available either in the original or in translation. The perspectives and ideas of those figures were widely discussed and debated socially – whether within the socially lofty circles of the intelligentsia, in political clubs and societies, or among the common folk – and formed the primary subject matter of much of the copious correspondence exchanged in the era between political and intellectual leaders both domestically and internationally. The ideas of the age were simply in the air in many circles, the focus of much attention of one sort or another, whether of agreement or dispute. Just as the leaders of the American Revolution and founders of the United States, Jefferson among the foremost of them, relied substantially upon such ideas in making the decision to set their ambitious revolt in motion, and then even more heavily in

framing their new nation, so too relied the various leaders and factions of the French Revolutionary Era in their own effort. Ideas such as those regarding the equality of men, right of self-determination, widespread suffrage, and fundamental human rights, provided powerful means of crystallizing systems of belief, political platforms, calls for change, motivation to action, and perhaps above all, logical justification for dramatic actions such as rebellion. Such ideas were necessary to the geneses of both of these momentous, unprecedented popular movements.

It is also within this realm that the deep, complex intellectual Jefferson himself was most at home, most adept, most fascinated. There was not much he enjoyed better than an evening of long discussions of political ideas with his intimates and other thinkers of the day, seeking always to persuade, debate, learn, influence and be influenced, by such sort of conversation – with each little piece and new perspective adding to his comprehension of the human condition.

E. Jefferson’s Official Duties in France

The entirely new surroundings in which he found himself in France – both the physical setting and the society – and the new sets of duties and activities which occupied his time during his five years there, did indeed accomplish much to revive Jefferson’s grief-stricken spirits; “behold me at length on the vaunted scene of Europe!,” he wrote with renewed enthusiasm to his friend Charles Bellini, after his arrival in Paris.¹⁴ The new experiences, political and philosophical ideas, numerous acquaintances, and environs would also prove to engage his attentions, occupy his ever-active and curious mind, and

¹⁴ Thomas Jefferson, letter to Charles Bellini, September 30, 1785, in *The Portable Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Merrill D. Peterson (New York: Penguin Books, 1975), 390.

provide him with many opportunities to learn much that would serve him well in later roles in following years, including the presidency.

Before fully taking up his official duties as minister to France in 1785, Jefferson spent his time during the first several months becoming acquainted with the new surroundings and culture around him, seeking an appropriate long-term home in Paris for himself, his daughter Patsy, and his household retinue brought with him from Virginia, a home which he found in the splendid Hôtel Langeac.¹⁵ In May of 1785, Adams left for Paris to assume his new appointment there as minister to Britain, and the aging, ailing Franklin retired his post and returned to America. Thus instead of working as one of a diplomatic contingent, alongside such notable peers, Jefferson found himself on his own. He characterized his situation following Franklin – whose amiable, outgoing personality had made him a widely admired favorite of the French – in the position, in self-effacing fashion typical to his publicly modest nature, as “no one can replace him [Franklin], Sir: I am only his successor.”¹⁶

Jefferson proved highly capable in his official duties in Paris, particularly as “certain aspects of his personality, notably his dislike of confrontation and his gift for the apt phrase, helped to ensure his success as a diplomat,”¹⁷ as well as, that, “Methodical habits, self-control, and an obsessive determination to keep busy were his nature to a fault. This intuitive aggressiveness in the management of affairs was the very signature of

¹⁵ Bernstein, *Thomas Jefferson*, 57.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

Jefferson the diplomat,”¹⁸ and furthermore, his “voracious appetite for facts and details made him an exemplary foreign representative.”¹⁹ His actions and manner of carrying out his ministerial duties are highly revealing of one of the significant parts of his personality and intellect – the eager, methodical mind, meticulousness in both his thoughts and actions, his voracious appetite for factual information and details. This is the scientifically inclined side of Jefferson, the part that throughout his life was often obsessive about conducting measurements and recording facts, that was fascinated with the ideas and innovations of science, that tinkered with gadgets to better them or even invent wholly new devices, such as his moldboard plow, that reveled in botanical observations. While carrying out his ministerial functions in France – just as in other periods of his life when carrying out his various official duties including Governor of Virginia, Secretary of State, and U.S. President – this side of Jefferson’s character expressed itself in great fashion, resulting in meticulous, conscientious work, and significantly beneficial contributions to the cause of the fledgling nation he represented. A frequent and gracious dinner host, both in official and unofficial capacities, for his quickly expanding circle of friends and acquaintances, Jefferson, “conscientiously made all his social activities serve the needs of America’s foreign policy.”²⁰ Jefferson’s activities focused largely on economic matters of trade and commerce, particularly on expanding opportunities and arrangements for free trade internationally. Drawing on his previous experience in both local and national political affairs, Jefferson conducted a

¹⁸ Adams, *The Paris Years of Thomas Jefferson*, 159.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Kaplan, *Jefferson and France*, 19.

wide variety of negotiations throughout his years in Paris, with European nations and a variety of private commercial firms, producing notable commercial treaties with nations such as Prussia, negotiating tariff regulations, and furthering American interests with private bankers in France and Holland.²¹ Jefferson's successes in these endeavors were, however, far from complete, as international belief at the time regarding economic matters did not tend heavily towards favoring free trade on any generalized basis; thus he often opted for the compromises most beneficial to American interests that he could obtain, "realizing that the ideal of free trade was impossible to achieve, Jefferson was willing to accept the alternative that each country pay the other only such duties as would the nations most favored in this respect."²² His efforts were instrumental in gaining access to new European markets for American goods, a condition critical to the future of the American economy.

Far less overtly, Jefferson also proved extremely adept at the gathering of intelligence, "his extensive letters home supplied John Jay, the Confederation's secretary for foreign affairs, and other well-placed Americans (including Washington and Madison) with detailed information on European affairs and their consequences for the United States,"²³ particularly regarding the intentions of the French monarch. Jefferson's numerous official successes were highly valuable to the still rather tenuous position of the young nation, and marked his tenure in France certainly as one of the many periods in which he provided great tangible benefit to his country.

²¹ Bernstein, *Thomas Jefferson*, 58.

²² Kaplan, *Jefferson and France*, 20.

²³ Bernstein, *Thomas Jefferson*, 58-59.

F. Interactions with French Revolutionary Figures and Ideas

Perhaps Jefferson's greatest sources of intellectual pleasure during his French stay derived from his personal interactions with the leading artistic, scientific, and intellectual figures of the era, many of whom he encountered in various salon settings, a number of whom would evolve over time into among his most valued correspondents and friends.

Such interactions provided in many ways the greatest satisfactions of his time there:

For the first time in his life, Jefferson was living in a rarefied cosmopolitan environment where every day he could meet and talk on equal terms with men and women who shared his own wide-ranging interests. He had found his true calling in this vital, unpredictable city in transition, aroused by its aesthetic and intellectual life, its climate of experiment and change, and its magnetic, heightened possibilities.²⁴

Among the numerous artistic, intellectual, scientific, and political luminaries with whom he met were numbered Comte Constantin de Volnoy, A.-L.-C. Destutt de Tracy, Pierre-George Cabanis, Pierre-Augustin Beaumarchais, the Marquis de Chastellux, Duc de La Rochefoucauld, George-Louis Buffon, the Marquis de Lafayette, the philosophe Marquis de Condorcet, and the celebrated chemist Antoine Lavoisier. Amiable evenings of dinner and philosophic conversation were frequently hosted, and enjoyed immensely, by Jefferson, with the likes of Condorcet, Lafayette, and La Rochefoucauld – men who “shared their host's open, candid faith in the natural rights of mankind, his dream of new self-governing republics on both sides of the Atlantic.”²⁵

It was within this milieu that Jefferson's only fully complete literary work appeared. Intended originally only for limited, private circulation, Jefferson learned in

²⁴ Adams, *The Paris Years of Thomas Jefferson*, 76-77.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 13.

late 1785 of plans to publish an unauthorized translation of his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, whose reputation had begun to spread underground. Concerned that such a step might result in a badly translated version that might damage his reputation, Jefferson consented to an authorized translation of the work by Morellet and open publication in 1787. The official translation and wider availability of the *Notes* would go on to further his reputation in France considerably, particularly with those who shared his devotion to such things as representative republican government and mankind's natural rights.

While certainly providing many hours of purely enjoyable social conversation, Jefferson's interactions with a number of French intellectuals would in time take on more significant qualities and produce substantive ramifications. This again is representative of Jefferson's personality – he was never content to be merely an observer, ponderer, or idle conversationalist, throughout his life such activities inevitably transferred into real action of one sort or another, whether political activity or serious writing or mechanical innovation or legislative reform. Jefferson certainly was not one to ever just sit still. His eternal interest in political-philosophic matters, combined with his developing amiable relationships with prominent intellectuals such as Condorcet, La Rochefoucauld, Lafayette, and du Pont de Nemours, brought him into direct contact with many of the figures and ideas that were forming the leading edge of what would coalesce, prior to his return to the United States, into the French Revolution. These interests and connections would form one of the most significant and intriguing components of his entire five-year experience in France.

Along with being the locus of what was unquestionably a fascinating environment to observe and discuss, the intellectual sphere of Paris, in the period leading up to the French Revolution, was awash in the innovative political ideas of the entire age – constituting a sort of multifaceted, many-branched workshop of political and social theories and ideals. Such an environment could not in any event have done anything other than be inordinately intriguing to one of a mind and interests such as Jefferson. That so many of the ideas swirling around in the day were directly in line with much of his own thinking, must have made the entire milieu seem an intellectual paradise to him. One fundamental perspective: “Jefferson’s reports from Paris during the terminal crisis of the *Ancien Régime* often appear inconsistent, but there are some fairly consistent themes within them...one theme is a wish to see France evolve in the direction of the American model, Liberty.”²⁶ Jefferson’s own authorship of the *Declaration of Independence* was not widely known in France at the time of his arrival, but the document itself was known and popular, “it remained a great revolutionary totem and manifesto for French liberals like Lafayette.”²⁷ The very ideals and principles expressed in it, as well as in other writings of the era of the American War of Independence, were among the foremost of the many being discussed and debated in intellectual and political circles throughout the years leading up to the outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789: universal rights, equality, religious liberty, widespread education, land allocation, rights to life and liberty, responsibilities to ensuing generations, among many others – ideals dear to Jefferson.

²⁶ Conor Cruise O’Brien, *The Long Affair: Thomas Jefferson and the French Revolution, 1785-1800* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 38.

²⁷ Adams, *The Paris Years of Thomas Jefferson*, 95.

While it is assuredly an overstatement and an oversimplification to hold that the French Revolution was merely nothing more than an extension of the prior American movement, as has often been held, the parallels between the two are certainly clear and many, the influence of the one upon the other undoubtedly significant. One may easily see such connections in the remarkable degree of similarity between Jefferson's *American Declaration* and the *Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen*, the corresponding proclamation of the French Revolutionary Era; the correlation is striking.

Jefferson's scorn for the political structure of the French monarchy, and his sympathy for the nation's citizenry, were both unquestionably clear, as he decried the "monstrous abuse of power under which these people were ground to powder."²⁸ Not merely sympathetic to the cause, not content just to discuss ideals and principles at leisure, a number of Jefferson's actions and interactions with some of the leading figures of the revolutionary effort went beyond the bounds of what was considered to be appropriate diplomatic protocol, to say the least – evolving in turn from onlooker, to sympathizer, to advisor of the revolutionary figures, to what would doubtlessly have been considered by the established French government to be outright co-conspirator. By 1789 he was engaged in such actions as being willing to "host a secret dinner"²⁹ for deputies of the recently self-instituted revolutionary *Assemblée Nationale*, and to aiding Lafayette in the drafting of a declaration for changes to the French Constitution³⁰. Again, we see in

²⁸ Jefferson, *Autobiography*, in the *Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Merrill D. Peterson (New York: Library of America, 1984), 84.

²⁹ Adams, *The Paris Years of Thomas Jefferson*, 292.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 293.

these stages aspects of Jefferson's personality predominating: intense interest in political-philosophical ideas, commitment to bettering and assuring the rights and lot of common people, active engagement in affairs of politics, and dedication to political reform.

Jefferson believed that a revolutionary effort in France would almost certainly result in the implementation of a constitutional monarchy and a reforming of the socio-political structure of the nation upon many of the same ideals on which the American model had been established. Furthermore, the entire process would set an example for the other nations of Europe, whose political structures he deemed to be as equally corrupt and deficient as the French, and who would likely follow suit to some degree or other. He would later come to be highly disturbed by the excesses of the later stages of the French Revolution, as it ran headlong into the bloodbath of the era of the *Terreur* by 1793, but his belief in and support of the effort during his own years in France was thorough and optimistic, "I hold it that a little rebellion now and then is a good thing, and as necessary in the political world as storms in the physical,"³¹ he wrote at the time.

³¹ Jefferson, letter to James Madison, January 30, 1787, in *The Portable Thomas Jefferson*, 417.

CHAPTER 3

CONCERNING EQUALITY

A. Historical Context

Jefferson's beliefs regarding human equality were one of the significant areas in which his views may seem rather enigmatic. To be sure, he was in the vanguard of those in the era who held that humans should rightfully be seen as equals, but his perspective was complicated and seemed to hold some significant inconsistencies. The principal drawback in his conceptions, as has been widely debated and criticized from the modern perspective, was his position regarding slavery and non-white persons in general, which will be examined in further in a later chapter of this paper. But the ways in which his views on equality were advanced, especially for his time, must be rightfully acknowledged for their socially progressive nature, and for the significance and impact they had on the era.

Western society – in Europe and in the proliferating European colonies elsewhere in the world at the time – had, of course, been structured fundamentally as a feudal caste system, stretching back centuries at least into Mediaeval times. Not only was this caste organization the *de facto* reality, it also had long been justified, seen as properly appropriate, and in many ways and places encoded officially into law. European societies were tiered, with the privileged aristocracy of successive ranks socially, politically, legally, and economically dominant over the vast mass of the population, the commoners, who owed fealty, deference, a range of practical services, and submission, to their societal superiors. The caste in which one was located was the result merely of one's

position at birth, and mobility between castes, especially upward, was in most locales extremely rare if not impossible. Obviously, considerable variation existed from nation to nation, as to the stringency and particulars with which the system was ensconced and functioned locally – looser in some places, far more severe and restrictive in others. Reliance on strict castes as the primary means of structuring society loosened far earlier in places such as the Low Countries, for example, than it did in Russia, where formal institutionalized serfdom remained entrenched until late in the 1800s. Societal arrangement in rigid castes was not only the concrete reality, but was defended and perceived to be what was correct. The justification for monarchy, for instance, had for centuries been based upon the mediaeval concept of the *divine right of kings*. If one was born into aristocratic position, the thinking went, it was because one was somehow inherently more worthy than commoners. High rank was not conceived as being merely a fortunate societal condition, nor simple happenstance; terms such as a person having “noble” blood, were in common usage, as was the notion that one must respect and defer to one’s “betters” in nearly every way.

Many of the most prominent thinkers of the Enlightenment began to erode the primacy of the long-unchallenged “truths” of such ideas, even to assail them outright. The advances of the *philosophe* Jean-Jacques Rousseau was of immense politico-philosophical achievement and influence in this regard. His ideas in both *On the Social Contract* and *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* – both of which were extensively well-known among thinkers and politically active people in France and elsewhere in Europe and the Americas – were groundbreaking in their attacks on such long-established

ways of perceiving society, government, and human relations. Philosophers and political writers of the Enlightenment such as Rousseau and Locke, perhaps most notably, looked to discredit absolute monarchy in particular, and did so successfully for many readers. They also began to cast arguments and ideas in terms of equality of persons in general, regardless of social rank or affluence. Such ideas were deeply feared and vilified by much of the establishment, the *Ancien Régime* – certainly for the threats to privilege that they represented, along with their novel rejection of longstanding convention – particularly among most of the conservative, wealthy elite. But they were also embraced by some in intellectual and political circles, widely read, debated, pondered over, and made into starting points for further philosophizing and political positions, such as was the case for so many of the leading figures of the American Revolution. The rise of the bourgeois class – which of course would continue enormously throughout the ensuing Industrial Revolution – also contributed to the challenging of traditional societal beliefs and structures, in a less theoretical, more practical manner, by compelling societal restructuring. The rising, proliferating bourgeois class – in France and elsewhere in Europe – began to gain sufficient clout, largely through their steadily if gradually growing affluence and economic influence, to make demands for greater *de jure* political power, demands that commanded attention. Common people were beginning to insist that they mattered too, that their existences deserved some respect, that they deserved a voice in their lot and governance. The increasing strength of the bourgeoisie lent added force to such arguments.

B. Jefferson's Views on Equality

One viable way of viewing the American Revolution (and there are numerous differing ways to do so), is as largely having been a rejection of such rigid caste systems. The United States did not end up having either a monarchy nor an aristocracy, at least in the overt formal sense, and with cause. Thinkers such as Jefferson, and many of his cohorts among the Founding Fathers, had set themselves in favor of the cause and rights of the common man, to greater or lesser extent.

Jefferson of course made his perspective on the matter clear in ringing tones in the Preamble of the American *Declaration of Independence*, using five words remarkable for their rhetorical simplicity yet earthshaking in their import and what would come to be their ultimate global significance over the ensuing centuries: *all men are created equal*.¹

European societies – consequentially, their colonies throughout the world as well – had for centuries been heavily stratified. Societal classes did not depend merely upon fiscal affluence or social prestige alone; the exalted ranks also enjoyed various legal rights and privileges which were often denied common people, such as suffrage, the ability to hold public office, various *de facto* or even *de jure* legal protections, among many others. Social deference by commoners to aristocrats was often legally required, rather than merely expected by custom. One particularly galling example of such practices in France was, of course, the near-total exemption for the aristocracy from the paying of taxes – a right which was both seen as infuriatingly unjust by the majority of the French populace, and which from a merely practical perspective was also a major

¹ *Declaration of Independence*, Preamble.

contributing factor leading directly to the crisis that erupted into the French Revolution. Such rights and privileges enjoyed by nobles did not have to be earned in any way, but were inherently theirs simply by fortune of birth. As mobility between classes was a near-impossibility in many nations, the acquisition of such privileges by one not born into them, was likewise essentially impossible.

The maxim that all people were in fact created equal – in many ways the single, indispensable principle upon which were constructed nearly all of the other political tenets of the entire American Revolutionary Era – directly contravened those privileges that had been the prerogatives of nobility for centuries, and indeed the fundamental assumptions that had ordered society for all that time as well. To the majority of aristocrats, whether in Britain, France, or elsewhere, such a proclamation would not only have been deeply threatening to their societal position and entire way of life, but would have been deemed utterly absurd and logically irrational. How, after all, could a low-life peasant have any status, of any sort, equal to that of duke? Especially to those of exalted station, the very idea was preposterous, risible. The ensuing success of the American revolt against the British, fueled in no small part by the unity of cause of so much of the American population that resulted from widespread belief in such ideals, presented to the societal establishment a new, startling reality: such a ‘preposterous’ ideal was creating a significant force with which they must reckon, and which conceivably could even grow into a power that may very well pose a threat to themselves. The years 1793 and 1794 would of course come to show, to the peril of so many French aristocrats, just how serious this threat could be.

The full significance of the advent of this perspective of fundamental equality, as a wide social belief, has perhaps become lost to current-day society to a considerable extent. It has formed much of the basis for our socio-political thinking for so long that it has become something of an overlooked afterthought – it is so obvious to us now as to have become a presumption. Its import at the time, however, and the full extent to which it represented a radical contradiction of centuries of Western socio-political thinking and functioning, can hardly be overstated. One historian characterized it thus: "Perhaps no single phrase from the Revolutionary era has had such continuing importance in American public life as the dictum 'all men are created equal.'"² That importance has spread, in the intervening two centuries-plus, well beyond the borders of the United States, to hold similarly preeminent significance in many other lands as well.

C. **Jefferson's Writings Concerning Equality**

The perspective on equality expressed by Jefferson in the *Declaration* may be found in various other places in his writings. Historical scholarship suggests that credit for the original idea should perhaps be accorded to Philip Mazzei, an Italian who was a close friend and correspondent, one of the many people with whom Jefferson discussed philosophical and political matters over the years. Jefferson himself was, however, certainly responsible for thrusting the concept into widespread public consciousness. He discussed various aspects of the tenet in a number of locations, notably including a letter to John Adams, one of his highly erudite efforts in which he draws upon several sources from Ancient Greece, denigrates the privileges of the aristocracy, and reaffirms his faith

² Jack P. Greene, *All Men Are Created Equal: Some Reflections on the Character of the American Revolution* (Oxford, U.K.: Clarendon Press, 1976), 5.

in the right and ability of common men to govern themselves well, stating that “such men may safely and advantageously reserve to themselves a wholesome controul over their public affairs.”³ Granting to common folk the ability to govern their society was not only what Jefferson believed to be their right, but was also what he believed would be most effective, rather than leaving such duties solely within the purview of the privileged.

Having seen the considerable success of many of these ideas concerning human equality in the establishing of the United States, Jefferson had turned his ideas to the French during his time there. What he saw was a similar challenge to the established order, based upon essentially the same principles, but a challenge being made against a far stronger, longer and more thoroughly entrenched caste system. Believing in the cause of those seeking to reform French society, and firmly convinced that his own political principles were correct, he moved to support the opposition as best he could during his years in France, at least within the bounds of what he deemed appropriate to his diplomatic position. Balancing his official responsibilities as American envoy in Paris, the need to respect diplomatic protocol, his intense interest in the developments in France as they unfolded, and his sympathy with the cause of French political reform, must surely have been both fascinating and also highly demanding to Jefferson on a daily basis.

³ Jefferson, letter to John Adams, 28 October 1813, in *The Adams-Jefferson Letters: The Complete Correspondence between Thomas Jefferson and Abigail and John Adams*, ed., Lester J. Cappon (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1959), 387.

CHAPTER 4

CONCERNING THE RIGHTS OF MAN

Every great reformer will most certainly display certain critical characteristics in common. One is the ability to identify and diagnose the problem at hand. Another is simply the inclination to respond to the difficulty at hand, to spring into action to meet the challenge. A third is the capacity to envision a model of some sort which will serve as an effective solution to whatever the problem may be. A fourth is the possession of some great capability – whether through dynamic oratorical skills, inspirational action, or compelling writing ability – whereby other people heed and respond to one's ideas, and an individual spark thus transforms into broader movement. Lack one or more of these qualities and one will find oneself consigned to the far more limited role merely of abstract theorist, perhaps, or misguided dreamer, or vacuous mouthpiece; hold them all and one just might change the course of history

Jefferson certainly possessed all of these attributes necessary to the great reformer, and in immense quantity. His analytic acumen brought him great insight into the real nature of the socio-political problems of the age. He was certainly motivated to engage in the fray, as his long record of political accomplishments shows. Although he was not a superlative orator, his abilities with the pen rank among the most superlative of all political leaders the world has ever known. And he was definitely a man of vision; his writings, positions, and actions all resulted from processes of continual contemplation, habitual questioning and probing, extensive discussion with his contemporaries, continual reading, and of vision. He possessed definite notions of what he thought should be

accomplished, of how society could be better structured, of the nature of the ultimate goal to be (hopefully) realized.

The presence of leaders with forward-looking vision, drawn from ideals, was one of the critical features of both the American and French movements. The American war against the British has often been characterized as nothing more than a revolt, a throwing off of their distant overlords in favor of local rule, and in many ways this label is entirely accurate. Had the political leadership of the day then progressed to installing essentially a replica of the British form of government – and there were indeed at least some in various quarters who felt at the time that the creation of an American monarchy would be the right course – the American effort would have amounted to little more than an independence movement. It was the actions subsequent to the fight for independence, the formation of the new model of government that the American (and later, the French as well) political system became, that transformed that revolt into something that may rightly be termed a revolution. One may easily use the term “revolutionary” to describe a process that casts off the centuries-old established model of top-down, monarchic-oligarchic rule, replacing it with fundamentally (if what admittedly was and still remains imperfect) democratic, representative government. This revolutionary nature was all the more significant given that it came about in major nations of the world, which France certainly was already, and the United States would become in time. Such a development did not come about by accident; it required the presence of ideals, of optimistic vision of what *could* be. Jefferson and his political contemporaries, both in the United States and in

the subsequent parallel effort in France, were indeed driven in their words, writings, actions, and accomplishments by such sorts of ideals and vision.

A. Jefferson's Views on Rights

The political principles that Jefferson held were not random, nor merely self-servingly beneficial to those of his own lofty, prosperous social station, nor did they exist in a vacuum. Rather, they were necessary conditions for the achievement of his vision.

... Jefferson's vision of the good society as an agrarian republic of independent yeoman farmers supporting themselves by their own labors. Self-sufficient to the greatest possible degree, they would maintain their virtue, the necessary ingredient for preserving a republic....¹

His political views thus were no haphazard assemblage of arbitrary tenets, but the systematically assembled, constituent elements of a broad conception: his vision of a healthy, flourishing, enduring society. While such a vision may hold tinges of utopian-like idealism, it was by no means wildly impracticable, given the fundamental social and geographical conditions extant in America at the time, and was definitely an optimistic, forward-thinking model for structuring a society.

Fully understanding the origins of Jefferson's views requires some comprehension both of his own personal character, and also of his background and upbringing. Here, a series of seemingly contradictory contrasts actually combined in a manner somewhat peculiarly harmonic to evolve into a complex, multi-faceted personality that made him a fascinating figure, and one who was far less conventional that may have been apparent at first sight.

¹ Bernstein, *Thomas Jefferson*, x.

To outward appearances, Jefferson was a typical member of the planter elite. However his surviving papers show signs that he was different; he was more disposed to the life of the mind, more intellectually venturesome, more inclined to question established customs...He recommended key authors of the Enlightenment, such as Locke, Hume, Bolingbroke, and Montesquieu, and advocated the habits of wide and deep reading.²

He was of a privileged familial background: affluent, extremely well educated and exceptionally well read, especially for his time and locale, with refined manners that made for proper company even in the drawing rooms of high social circles. Yet he was also raised in surroundings mostly populated by the simple country folk of farmland Virginia, always comfortable in the activities typical to rural life. He had an incredibly meticulous, observant, methodical mind eternally captivated by nearly any sort of scientific endeavor, but with a deep streak of humanity and concern for the common man that belied the sometimes cold, reserved exterior he tended to present to the world. He enjoyed some of the benefits accorded by affluence, such as elegant surroundings, fine food and wine, and urbane conversation, yet also delighted in humbler rural pursuits such as riding and farming. His was an intellect of the highest, most sophisticated order, yet one may reasonably claim that throughout his life he remained largely a country boy at heart.

Jefferson was a member of one of Virginia's most prominent families. Unlike other members of his social class, however, he was born and raised on the western edge of Great Britain's American empire. His early makeup thus blended aristocrat and frontiersman.³

Contemptuous of the urban masses, never entirely comfortable amid the snobbery of aristocratic company, Jefferson was always comfortable interacting with 'salt of the

² Ibid., 9.

³ Ibid., 1.

earth'-types of people. Of all the various aspects of and influences on his character, it is perhaps that upbringing among the country folk of rural Virginia – that class of 'yeoman farmers' to whom he often referred in his writings – that does most to explain and illuminate Jefferson's views. Especially through his critical formative years, he'd done far more than merely live *among* such rural folk, he'd largely lived *with* them, known their experiences and activities, shared their challenges, admired their industriousness and work ethic, respected their abilities, opinions, sense of personal responsibility and, perhaps above all, their self-sufficiency. An understanding of that upbringing – and the respect, affinity, and sympathy he held for the yeoman farmer classes that surrounded him – does much to elucidate the genesis of Jefferson's political perspectives and how they came to be as they were.

Ever the systematic thinker, Jefferson understood that a number of political conditions must prevail in order for a society to be constructed that would come to be the embodiment of his vision. He also believed, in tune with many of his political contemporaries and much of the progressive political thinking of the day, that certain rights were intrinsic to humanity. In rather a Kantian, deontological sense, such rights existed inherently, because the essential nature of humanity – of what a human necessarily is – incorporates certain realities which adhere thus to every individual human, regardless of societal station. Foremost among these elements were some broad concepts which created the very foundation for society and its right governance.

In the American *Declaration of Independence*, he of course established that socio-political foundation in the Preamble, in direct and remarkably eloquent fashion: all men are created equal, with the unequivocal rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

The Declaration blended key currents of Enlightenment thought with hard-edged American constitutional and legal arguments. For example, in its preamble, Jefferson set forth arguments about the natural rights of human beings, devised by the seventeenth-century English philosopher John Locke, to lay the ground for invoking the right of revolution against a tyrant, which was the stated purpose of the Declaration. Jefferson also hoped to state the values by which Americans would govern themselves. Thus, the Declaration looks backward, as the last word in the American argument with Britain, and forward, as a statement of the principles of American experiments in government.⁴

Such conceptions are so familiar to us now, more than two centuries on, and so taken for granted as surpassing the obvious, that it is easy to lose sight of just how radically they deviated from the broad scope of centuries of socio-political thought and practice that preceded. All members of the human race have an inherent right to their lives once they are born. Each has an equally inherent right to their liberty, to lead their lives as they wish and can. Each has the right to pursue whatever course of action they believe may bring them a satisfactory existence. Each possesses such fundamental rights on an equal par with every other individual – the lowliest peasant every bit as much as the loftiest bourgeois or aristocrat. Furthermore, said rights were *unalienable*⁵, not capable of being repudiated, *self-evident*⁶, thus axiomatic and needing no proof, and intrinsic, because

⁴ Ibid., 33.

⁵ *Declaration of Independence*, Preamble.

⁶ Ibid. Historical records suggest that credit for this seminal term ‘self-evident’ actually be accorded to Benjamin Franklin, who suggested that language as an improvement on Jefferson’s original phrasing “sacred and un-deniable” which does not ring quite as forcefully or concisely.

individuals possess these rights inherently due to being *endowed by their Creator*⁷ with them, thus such rights did not need to be earned or justified, but were inherent consequences for human beings simply through their very existence. Such thinking was, along with the basic precept of human equality, completely contrary to the status quo that existed and had done so throughout Western societies for centuries – a long tradition in which the societally exalted largely get to do what they will, while everyone else must accept what is required and imposed upon them. Again, as with the basic idea of equality, such principles were not seen at all favorably, to say the least, by the majority of European aristocracy; but, as one would expect, they were immensely popular with common folk, who made up the vast numeric proportion of the overall populace everywhere.

Of these rights, perhaps Jefferson's greatest focus was on that of liberty – the right to lead the life, as best one can manage, that one chooses to lead, without being fettered by unjust external control or interference. Jefferson characterized it thus: “rightful liberty is unobstructed action according to our will within limits drawn around us by the equal rights of others.”⁸ The various forms of political, social, and economic restrictions, requirements, control, and interference of government and of the aristocracy that had so often plagued common people were not to be tolerated, and *should not* have to be. Within those limits Jefferson mentions, of respecting the rights of others to do the same, people should simply be let alone to live their lives as they themselves saw fit.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Jefferson, letter to Isaac H. Tiffany, April 4, 1819, Founders Online, [accessed 10 January 2015], <http://founders.archives.gov/?q=%20Author%3A%22Jefferson%20Thomas%22%20tiffany&s=1111311111&r=1>.

Such rights were of course later to be formally codified within the United States in the form of the first ten amendments to the Constitution – the Bill of Rights – of which Jefferson was an ardent supporter.

Jefferson further promulgated, again within that most remarkable Preamble, two essential political principles which have served ever since as cornerstones of the modern philosophical foundation of governance, which were no less radical at the time. One is the right of the people to self-determination, that governments derive *their just powers from the consent of the governed*.⁹ The second, entirely related, is that any government that acts in such a way that it infringes upon or is destructive to those rights of the populace, essentially is in default of its obligations, and the governed thus hold the right *to alter or to abolish it*. These principles together establish in essence a reciprocal relationship between ruler and governed, each with an inherent set of obligations towards the other. The people owe fealty, respect to their governor, and obedience to the laws established by the government; the governor in turn owes fealty, respect for their rights, and the obligation to govern justly and beneficently, to the governed.

Such principles ran diametrically in opposition to centuries-old political doctrine in Europe, which had long held basically that monarchs (and by extension, their appointed agents or deputies, such as government ministers) ruled not by anyone's permission or approval, but simply through inherent right as monarch – this is the proverbial *divine-right theory of kingship*, rooted deep in the Mediaeval past. Obligations of loyalty and responsibility, according to said longstanding tradition, existed in a

⁹ *Declaration of Independence*, Preamble.

decidedly one-way orientation: the people owed fidelity, duty, and obedience to their monarch (and again, by extension, to his representatives carrying out the actual day-to-day governance). Monarchs ruled as they wished, the governed suffered what they must. While the concrete realities of how governance actually functioned may have differed from time to time and place to place over the centuries – with some dilution of regal powers in England after the imposition of the *Magna Carta*, to give one example, contrasted by the near-absolutism of the French monarchy during the reign of Louis XIV, to give another – whatever limits on monarchic power may have existed, would inevitably have been yielded to aristocratic might, or perhaps rising bourgeois financial capacity, rather than out of any deference to the common mass of the populace. The essential principles behind European monarchic rule, justifying its existence and governing the lives of its subjects, especially the lives of common folk, nonetheless still remained largely in place unto the eras of the respective American and French revolutions.

Political tenets which challenged, let alone entirely contravened, the privileged, often largely unfettered position of European monarchs, surely were not greeted by such rulers with calm equanimity. This was indeed the case in both the American and French upheavals, where the open declarations of principles such as political equality, unalienable self-evident rights of all men, and obligation of the crown to the populace, were greeted with dismissive contempt by the respective monarchies and their supporters. Such contempt would later turn to increasing outrage as the forces trumpeting such beliefs grew sufficiently large and active that they had to be taken seriously.

Jefferson saw the need and right of additional political tenets, of a rather more practical than theoretic nature, aimed largely at establishing conditions which would maintain the ongoing success and prosperity of the sort of state, the good society – comprised largely of “independent yeoman farmers supporting themselves by their own labors” – that he envisioned. Notable among such tenets, he held that some system of free public education was entirely necessary; a democratic republic relying upon the active political engagement of its citizens needed them to have attained at least some respectable degree of education in order to function effectively. He believed, “If a nation expects to be ignorant and free, in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be.”¹⁰ He also believed in the necessity of the free press, to see that pertinent news and information were widely disseminated and also to act as a curb on the sorts of covert political skulduggery that too often results in self-interested abuse of power by the privileged few:

The functionaries of every government have propensities to command at will the liberty and property of their constituents. There is no safe deposit for these but with the people themselves, nor can they be safe with them without information. Where the press is free, and every man able to read, all is safe.¹¹

And he believed strongly in the need for wholesale religious freedom, including the separation of church and state, he being well aware of the history of religious quarrels, favoritism, and persecution of various sorts that had caused so much oppression and conflict throughout many countries for centuries. Determining one’s religious faith,

¹⁰ Jefferson, letter to Charles Yancey, January 6, 1816, The Library of Congress: The Thomas Jefferson Papers, [accessed 12 January 2015], <http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/mtj:@field%28DOCID+@lit%28tj110163%29%29>.

¹¹ Ibid.

and practicing it as one chooses, was also a matter that Jefferson believed should rightfully be left up to the individual, without official preference, prejudice, or influence. His own religious views undoubtedly made him sensitive to the need for wide religious toleration. Although raised in the Church of England, and respectful and admiring of the moral tenets of Christianity, the mature Jefferson did not accept all of the beliefs and precepts of that denomination, and took issue with various aspects of organized religion in general; he later may have had leanings towards Deism in his own personal beliefs. Jefferson certainly objected to the strife and maltreatment that established state religions, of whatever sort, had been prone to inflict upon religious minority groups. His authoring of the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom of 1777 – which disestablished the Church of England as the official state church of Virginia and guaranteed religious freedom to people of all faiths – stands as a landmark in the overall cause of religious freedom, and which Jefferson personally counted, quite justifiably, among the finest of his political achievements.¹²

These views, especially when taken collectively, show Jefferson's humaneness. The philosophical core of his overall perspective on humanity and society – emphasizing the rights of all men, the inherent fundamental equality of all regardless of socioeconomic station, and creating circumstances in which all may themselves direct their own lives and hold at least decent opportunity for achieving success and prosperity – reveals the extent of his compassion for the common man. That primary concern for the rights and plight of the common man should form the center of a system for ordering society, was in

¹² Bernstein, *Thomas Jefferson*, x.

itself an innovative departure from centuries of political tradition in Western culture, and highly controversial in the day. Jefferson's embracing of such principles, and his eloquently, inspirationally articulate manner of expressing them, do him enormous credit, and undoubtedly form much of the basis for why he has been looked back upon by many with such esteem as one of the great political leaders of human history.

B. Jefferson's Writings Regarding the Rights of Man

Jefferson's principles were brilliantly expressed in his various writings – his work on the 1776 draft of the Virginia Constitution, the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom, the American *Declaration of Independence*, much of his extensive correspondence, and the *Notes on the State of Virginia* (his only completed, published book), all standing, each in its own way, as eloquent paragons of political writing that rank among the finest ever produced by any era of human endeavor. The *Notes* ranges particularly far afield, touching on a wide variety of topics including history, law, geography, politics, natural resources, economics, and scientific knowledge. A paean to the state of Virginia, as well as a highly learned, thoughtful, and fascinating work, the book presents, in sum, his view of what constitutes the good society, which he felt his beloved Virginia embodied. The *Declaration*, obviously, both was at the time, and remains still today, unquestionably the most widely known of all his writings. While many of the pieces may differ from each other in various ways, whether of detail, emphasis, or sometimes even wholesale (one must always bear in mind his willingness to constantly reevaluate and revise his beliefs, as mentioned earlier), they do have a number of themes that run through them rather consistently, including respect for the individual,

insistence on the existence of fundamental rights regardless of social station, contempt for unearned or abusive privilege, responsibility of the ruler to the governed, and deep-seated compassion for humanity.

It must be acknowledged, however, that for all of the extraordinary abilities that Jefferson possessed, he was not a particularly outstanding political or philosophical innovator. He was by all accounts a deep thinker, a voracious reader, a superb conversationalist, an exemplary systematizer who could deftly assemble seemingly disparate parts into a coherent whole, an active and effective political leader, and unquestionably one of the most gifted political writers in human history; but he was not a great originator of ideas. One recent historian characterized this aspect of Jefferson's abilities thus:

Ranging more freely than his friends James Madison and John Adams or his adversary Alexander Hamilton, he most resembles Benjamin Franklin, who similarly dazzles us with his spectrum of abilities and interests. The problem is that, too often, Jefferson gets credit for originality that he neither claimed nor deserved. Although widely read and energetically curious, he was a brilliant adapter and interpreter of his era's ideas rather than a figure of towering creativity.¹³

One may, without great difficulty, trace the origins of the majority of Jefferson's political tenets and beliefs to some of the great writers of the Enlightenment who were indeed remarkable theorizers and innovators, such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, John Locke, Francis Bacon, Montesquieu, Isaac Newton, René Descartes, Voltaire, and Thomas Hobbes – works by each may be found in Jefferson's preserved personal

¹³ Ibid., xiv.

library.¹⁴ The sources of the principles that lie at the core of Jefferson's system of political beliefs are readily identifiable. In *Leviathan*, Hobbes furnished the basis of social contract theory of government, for example, which Rousseau developed even more fully in *Du Contrat Social*. In various works, Voltaire and Rousseau both argued extensively for the structuring of society to be based logically upon reason, rather than mere traditional practice or Christian faith, perspectives certainly informed by the astounding scientific advances and reliance on reason of Newton and Descartes. Montesquieu introduced the principle of separation of powers in government. Bacon, Hobbes, and Rousseau were all proponents, in one way or another, of theories of natural law, which lends the critical concept of universality to matters of regulating human affairs, and thus by extension the primary precept of equality. From Locke, arguably the most significant political philosopher of the entire Age of Enlightenment, comes an almost overflowing abundance of ideas and precepts whose influence would range far throughout the era. Locke's *Two Treatises of Government* was outstanding in significance, presenting a wealth of material that would prove to be of crucial importance to subsequent political reformers, including the demolition of the *divine right of kings* theory as utterly senseless, further development of the concepts of natural law and the social contract, the principle that only governments that have the consent of the people are legitimate, the contestation that governments ruling without such consent may rightfully be overthrown, and the introduction of the idea of "life, liberty, and property"

¹⁴ Monticello.org: Thomas Jefferson's Libraries, [accessed 27 January 2015], <http://www.tjlibraries.monticello.org/www.librarything.com/catalog/ThomasJefferson/monticellolibraryca1770s1815>.

being fundamental human rights, a phrase retained by Jefferson, in slightly altered form, as a core principle in the *Declaration of Independence*.

It is well beyond the scope of this paper to attempt to enumerate all of the philosophical influences on and origins of Jefferson's political beliefs; suffice it to say that they were many and varied, drawn principally from the great political theorists of the Enlightenment era, the active discussion of whose ideas extended widely throughout his contemporaries both in America and Europe. While figures such as Locke, Hobbes, Rousseau, *et al.* may have far surpassed Jefferson in the originating of principles and ideas, the providing of theory was most often the limit of the impact they made. Few men have ever been able to match Jefferson's abilities at gathering ideas and arranging them into a systematic whole, then transmitting them through almost incomparably inspirational writing to the broad public in a fashion that resonates mightily with them, and converting such ideas into direct, active, tangible change for the better.

CHAPTER 5

CONCERNING THE STRUCTURE OF GOVERNMENT

Along with addressing equality and basic rights, Jefferson also presents pertinent, substantive views regarding the appropriate structuring of the apparatus of government itself. This was an area where Jefferson's meticulous, ordered, scientifically inclined mind proved of immense value over many years throughout his various political positions. Forming a government – especially one in what essentially was an entirely new form, system, and rationale, as was that of the newly founded American democracy – is an extraordinarily complicated business, requiring immense amounts of complex planning and organization. Such a process requires leaders and planners skilled both in comprehending the broad conceptual aspects of governance, and also in effectively managing the million concrete details that must be addressed. Jefferson was exceptionally capable at both – able to grasp the overarching theoretical concepts, and to navigate the planning of minutiae – thus providing innumerable invaluable contributions to the American and French efforts alike, during the respective revolutionary phases and for years afterwards from his various positions in public office.

A. Jefferson's Views on the Structure of Government

For the purposes of this paper, Jefferson's views regarding a handful of the broader conceptual aspects of government are of greatest pertinence. These views largely encompass not only many of the foundational principles upon which the United States was established and continues to function, but the fundamental principles on which democratic governments in a great many nations throughout the world are based. Within

the context of the Jeffersonian perspective, the single idea that must be the starting place for any discussion of the nature of government, and from which essentially all else springs, is the concept that sovereignty lies with the people who comprise a nation, not the ruler. Centuries of European tradition had held that the ruler personally held sovereignty – ‘sovereign’ being an oft-used synonym for monarch – and therefore was entitled to rule as he (or occasionally, she) willed. Placing sovereignty in the populace categorically inverts the relationship between ruler and ruled, demolishing that longstanding political orthodoxy, creating an entirely new conception of statehood. This is the source of the tenet, expressed by Jefferson in the *American Declaration*, that governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed. As such, a government is therefore responsible to its citizenry; it must govern to their benefit and in accordance with their wishes and priorities, including establishing the rights of the people and respecting those rights. Failure to do properly so, in the view of the populace, grants the people the right to alter that government or even to replace it. These principles were not only fundamental to the American Revolution, but were held by Jefferson to be among those truths which were universal, thus they were applicable anywhere else as well, most immediately pertinently in France.

From a rather more practical, than broadly philosophical, perspective, because of his considerable experience in government, Jefferson understood the impracticalities of the direct involvement of every citizen in every aspect of the ongoing process of governing a society, particularly one as physically large and populous as the United States, or France. Making every single decision regarding governance via direct vote of

every citizen, as per the Athenian model of democracy in Ancient Greece, simply was not physically feasible. The only practical way of managing a democracy in a large society is through representative government, with that representation direct, proportional, and accomplished via election of representatives – a process that necessitates rights of suffrage well beyond the strict, relatively tiny confines that had constituted the franchise within the British system. In such way, the voice of each citizen may be heard, a process which would be a significant means of respecting the equality which was one of the most sacrosanct principles justifying the American revolt and subsequent founding of the United States. Furthermore, it went far, in the eyes of Jefferson and the other Founding Fathers, towards ensuring that the new government would in fact be responsive and responsible to the people. He was also a firm believer in significantly limited government:

Jefferson was, at once, a fervent American nationalist and an even more fervent believer in state sovereignty within a limited federal republic. Over time, he developed an elaborate, meticulous picture of the ideal structure of American politics and government.¹

This would prove to be the source of considerable conflict between himself, along with those leaders who agreed with his position, and the Federalist camp led by Alexander Hamilton, in the process of shaping the new American government. Jefferson distrusted centralized government; he believed it should be only as large and as powerful as was absolutely necessary for carrying out a limited set of duties which were inherently beyond the scope of individual states, such as foreign relations and national defense. He felt that the majority of the actions of governing a society should be carried out at the

¹ Bernstein, *Thomas Jefferson*, xi.

local level, where local priorities could be more directly and responsively addressed. He also firmly believed that people's lives should be as free as possible from government interference – here appears once again his abiding, immense respect for the self-reliance of the independent yeoman farmer – thus smaller and limited government was necessary, to keep such interference in check as much as possible.

B. Jefferson's Writings Regarding the Structure of Government

Jefferson's perspectives on government appear in many places in his various writings – in countless official documents from his time in the Virginia legislature and later Governor, his years as Minister in France, as Congressman, Secretary of State, Vice President, and President, in the *Declaration of Independence*, of course, and throughout his near-endless correspondence. The *Notes on the State of Virginia* presents perhaps the most extensive and systematic examination of his views collected in a single work, covering multifarious aspects of government, ranging from his opinions of what constitutes the good society to separation of church and state, from constitutional government to individual rights, separation of powers within government to checks and balances. Much of the particular way in which the American government was constructed, both in its overall basic nature and in various specific details and provisions, clearly can attribute much of its genesis to his views.

To bring to a close this extended digression, over the past few chapters, into political matters primarily central to the American Revolution, one may perhaps raise the question: all very nice, but does that cover anything more than the basics of what one would find in any standard high school-level course on American history or civics... what

has all this to do with the French? The core ideals and principles of the American Revolution had enormous significance to the French at the time during their own revolutionary era in the late 1700s (and retrospectively from a present-day view as well, as a means of greater understanding of that era – of many of the significant forces, ideas, and influences which all had extensive impact on it in various ways). The philosophical principles expressed in the various political writings of the American Revolutionary Era, and certainly in its major foundational documents such as the *Declaration of Independence* and U.S. Constitution, were not merely elements of rhetorical window-dressing. The leaders of the American Revolution were not looking to replace a distant unjust tyranny, which they certainly viewed the British monarchy to be, merely with their own local version of essentially the same. In addition to throwing off the overlordship of the British monarchy, they sought to establish in its place a form of government which would be far different in nature, one that fit the wishes and priorities of themselves and their countrymen, a form that would systemically resolve the deep grievances they had with the British political model. To accomplish this goal they needed a solid philosophical foundation, one based logically in reason and defensible principles, upon which this new system of government could be constructed: a philosophical foundation which would legitimize both the revolution and the nature of the new system of governance created in its aftermath. They expressed those principles in those foundational documents of the new republic, both to justify their actions in the revolt against Britain, and also to establish the essential framework by which to move forward in building the new nation. One principal reason why the French took significant

inspiration in many ways from the American effort was simply because the mass of the French populace held similar grievances with their own monarch and ruling system, and were looking for similar sorts of solutions as had been found by the Americans. The purport of this paper is principally to trace whatever philosophical crossover may have existed between the American and French Revolutions, especially those with relation to Thomas Jefferson in particular, one of the toweringly foremost figures of the former of these two great national conflicts. To this purpose, areas in which one may identify overlappings, parallels, and both direct and indirect influence between the two movements, were unquestionably numerous and considerable, as will be examined in the following two chapters.

CHAPTER 6

INFLUENCE OF JEFFERSON'S TIME IN FRANCE

Jefferson was indeed substantively influenced politically and philosophically during his five years of residence as minister plenipotentiary in France. This influence took a variety of forms, some direct, some indirect, some the result of his interactions with the common people of the land, some derived from innumerable conversations with his political contemporaries both French and from elsewhere. And a great deal of that influence certainly derived from his immediate, first-person observations of the dramatic, tumultuous developments of the French Revolution as they unfolded in their historically epic, chaotic fashion.

A. Social and Cultural Interaction with the French

Jefferson's relationship with France and the French from a more personal perspective was rather more complicated and in some ways ambiguous, than were his interactions, activities, and effectiveness in his official ministerial capacity; yet they are equally as revealing of his remarkable nature, if not more so. Taking into account all of the constituent aspects of his entire sojourn there, Jefferson's relationship with France and the French may perhaps best be described as dichotomous, as one of love/hate. There were many elements of the experience which fascinated him and which he grew to adore; there were numerous others which he found immensely distasteful. One may link his respective reactions to given facets, to qualities in his personality – characteristics which may at times be seen as rather contradictory to each other. At heart, and largely as a result of many critical aspects of his upbringing, Jefferson was essentially a simple country boy.

He was raised, and throughout his life was often most comfortable, in the Virginia countryside – in rustic environs, with rather a simple and relaxed lifestyle and pace, the pastoral activities centered on agricultural life, largely amid simple yeoman farm-folk as neighbors – from which came his lifelong attachment to pursuits deriving fundamentally from nature, such as agriculture and scientific matters, his fondness for the outdoors, and his ease with and sympathy towards common rural folk. “Those who labour in the earth are the chosen people of God,”¹ he declared regarding the latter. Conversely, he was also gifted with a remarkably advanced intellect, had enjoyed an upbringing of considerable affluence within that rustic setting, due to his family’s circumstances, and had been the beneficiary of what for the times was an education unusually extensive for the place and time, as his father “had seen to it that his son got the best education available in the colony...at an early age he was exposed to the wider world reached through the classics.”² Therefore Jefferson also had great appreciation and fondness for certain elements of life that were extremely sophisticated – the fine arts, grand architecture, classical music, methodical urban planning, and refined conversation, particularly concerning sophisticated philosophical and political ideas. Thus we find in Jefferson a person who is a bit of a contradiction: one who has a decided preference for certain characteristics of both simple everyday common existence and also the trappings of high society, yet who at the same time is not entirely at home with every facet of either.

During Jefferson’s years in France one may find alternating examples of each of the above tendency – appreciation for some parts of the life of commoners, disdain for

¹ Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, in *The Portable Thomas Jefferson*, 217.

² Adams, *The Paris Years of Thomas Jefferson*, 29.

other aspects, as well as enjoyment of, even amazement for, certain facets of French *haute société*, but antipathy towards others. Never comfortable in cities anywhere, to say the least, Jefferson had mixed feelings towards Paris. He was immensely taken by many of the examples of impressive architecture to be found there, certainly appreciated the city's abundance of artistic and cultural opportunities, and was intrigued by ongoing efforts in the sphere of urban planning. But he detested the urban underclasses – thus, the majority of the populace – both of Paris and elsewhere in Europe, essentially considering them to be nothing more than uncivilized rabble, he “saw the urban poor not as fellow human beings deserving compassion but as the inevitable, degraded byproducts of cities.”³ Jefferson himself denigrated them rather harshly, writing that “the mobs of great cities add just so much to the support of pure government as sores do to strength of the human body.”⁴ Conversely, he had a deep affinity for the peasantry he encountered throughout the countryside of France. One may see here, in his reactions to both the rural peasantry and to the urban masses, undoubtedly the effects of his own rural upbringing in shaping his reactions to differing sorts of common people.

Jefferson's most extensive series of interactions with folk of the countryside came particularly during his travels, ostensibly for reasons of health, to and through the South of France, and then briefly into Italy, during the winter of 1787. The trip lasted some three months, covering over 1200 miles, during which Jefferson visited over one hundred towns and cities throughout various regions of France and Italy, including Champagne, Burgundy, Lyon, Provence, Marseilles, Nice, Turin, Milan, Genoa, Bordeaux, La

³ Bernstein, *Thomas Jefferson*, 66.

⁴ Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, in *The Portable Thomas Jefferson*, 217.

Rochelle, Brittany, and the Loire Valley. The journey fascinated him on many levels, as he wrote to William Short that, the “architecture, painting, sculpture, antiquities, agriculture, the condition of the laboring poor fill all my moments.”⁵ He made it a point to visit as many ancient Greek and Roman ruins as he could, and his enthusiastic admiration for the *Maison Quarree* in Nîmes has been widely noted. During his travels, he again continually exercised the differing sides of his complex character and interests – scientific, aesthetic, and political alike – along with viewing the local architectural and artistic examples, he made extensive observations and notes of agricultural practices, collected a wide variety of seeds to bring back to America to further agriculture there, and made many efforts to interact kindly and sympathetically with the local common folk across the countryside, for “he felt deep compassion for the rural poor.”⁶ While Jefferson’s appreciation and admiration of the sights and splendors he encountered in France were considerable, the overall effect of the experiences on him was considerably more nuanced, complex, and reinforcing of his reformist socio-political views:

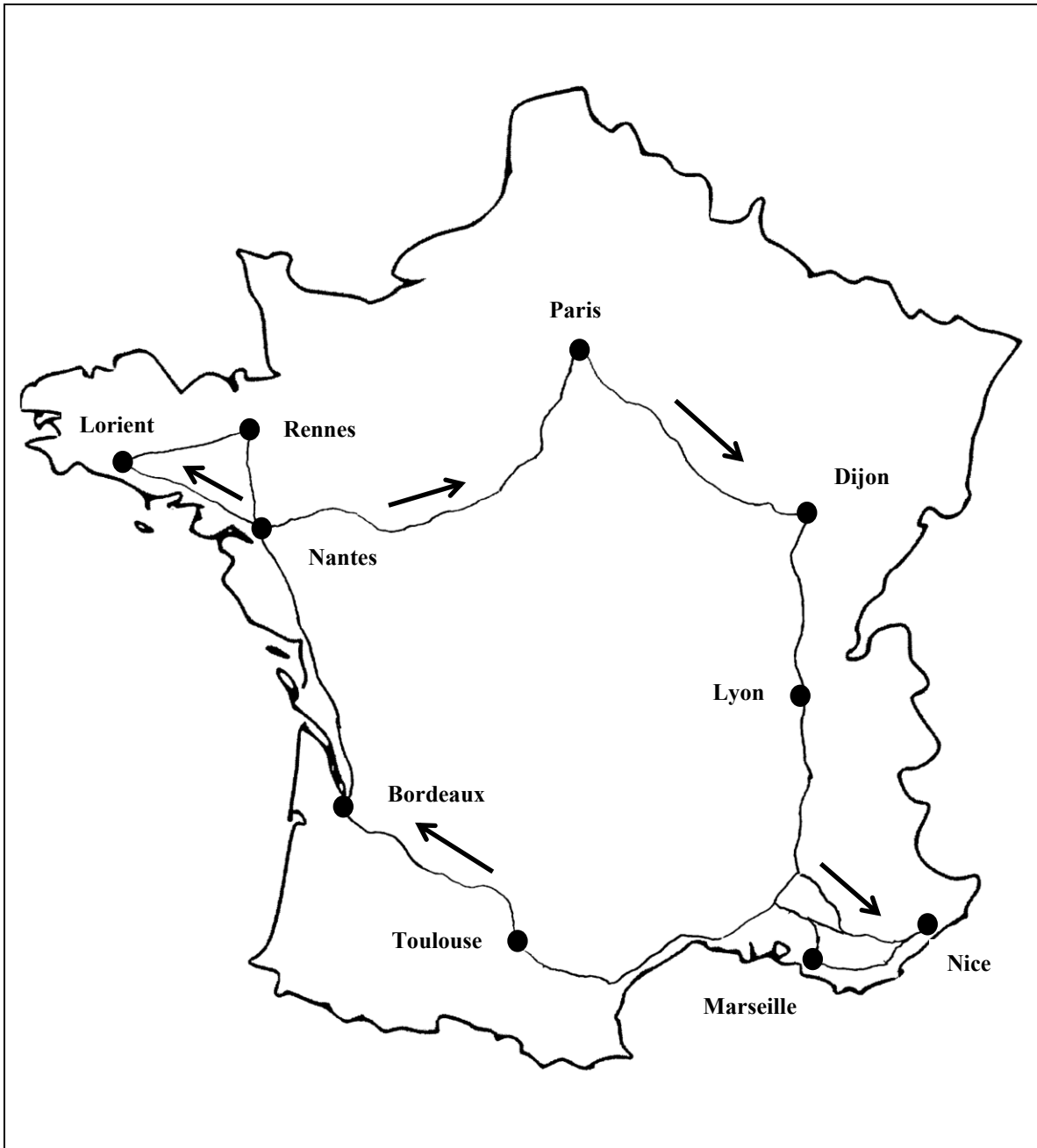
For Jefferson, the cultural monuments of European countries often were less significant as monuments than they were as examples of why the political and social institutions of those countries should be reformed.⁷

⁵ Adams, *The Paris Years of Thomas Jefferson*, 109.

⁶ Bernstein, *Thomas Jefferson*, 66.

⁷ George Green Shackelford, *Thomas Jefferson’s Travels in Europe, 1784-1789* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 5.

Figure 1. Route of Jefferson's Travels in France and Italy, 1787⁸



⁸ Map created by the author, based upon the itinerary of Jefferson's travels provided by Monticello.org, [accessed 3 December 2014], <http://www.monticello.org/site/research-and-collections/journey-through-france-and-italy-1787>.

Jefferson's social interactions with the upper ranks of French society again displayed a considerable degree of dividedness. The difference in conditions among the social classes was a fundamental concern for him, as "the gap separating France's rich and poor appalled Jefferson."⁹ As he himself wrote to Charles Bellini, "the truth of Voltaire's observation offers itself perpetually, that every man here must be either the hammer or the anvil,"¹⁰ a reaction entirely in line with his longstanding belief that the strength and potential of the United States lay greatly in the lot of its yeoman farmer classes. While certainly capable of comporting himself with perfectly appropriate decorum, Jefferson was not naturally given to always be entirely at his ease in lofty social circles, in the way that Franklin had done so easily and endearingly to the French during his own years in Paris, for example, for "Franklin's provincial presence caught the popular imagination at every level of French society."¹¹ Jefferson had essentially no patience for or interest in the sorts of gossiping, petty intrigues, and social machinations that so dominated the circles of the French *haut monde* of the era, "by temperament and by choice, Jefferson distanced himself from the shallow, sarcastic wit that defined *mondain* society."¹² He much preferred quieter evenings of dinner and excellent conversation with a small group of intimates, over grand soirées. Conversely, he was immensely drawn, one might even say captivated, by the abundant, rich, highly varied artistic and intellectual offerings available in France at the time, particularly in Paris – all

⁹ Bernstein, *Thomas Jefferson*, 66.

¹⁰ Jefferson, letter to Charles Bellini, September 30, 1785, in *The Portable Thomas Jefferson*, 390.

¹¹ Adams, *The Paris Years of Thomas Jefferson*, 74.

¹² *Ibid.*, 77.

of which appealed greatly to the refined parts of his character – as he “took pleasure in exchanging ideas with the extraordinary array of talented individuals in that talented age—writers, scientists, artists, philosophers—who thrived in the urban setting.”¹³

Jefferson often attended a wide variety of the cultural institutions of Paris throughout his stay there, its spaces displaying the visual arts, notable architectural examples, and theatre performances in particular, much to his great delight and intellectual benefit, as he noted to Bellini, “were I to proceed to tell you how much I enjoy their architecture, sculpture, painting, music, I should want words; it is in these arts they shine.”¹⁴. He “frequented several of the leading Paris theaters, where he saw plays by Racine, Molière, Lesage, and Dancourt,”¹⁵ notably including Beaumarchais’ daring *Marriage of Figaro* – a work of pointed social commentary, skewering the French nobility, deftly disguised as comedic farce – and later added the work to his personal library.¹⁶ He “appreciated the allusions in *Figaro* to freedom of expression, equality of birth, and the evils of summary imprisonment. But the play also dramatized for him the fundamental social and political divisions between the Old and New Worlds”¹⁷ – some substantive political concepts passing beyond a mere evening’s entertainment, speaking poignantly to the philosophical side of his nature and dovetailing with the mass of principles and ideas constantly under consideration and review somewhere in his mind.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Jefferson, letter to Charles Bellini, September 30, 1785, in *The Portable Thomas Jefferson*, 391.

¹⁵ Adams, *The Paris Years of Thomas Jefferson*, 68.

¹⁶ Ibid., 71.

¹⁷ Ibid., 71-72.

Not content to be merely an observer, “Jefferson’s wide-ranging artistic enthusiasms are reflected in the steady – some feel indulgent – accumulation of furnishings and artworks for his houses in Paris.”¹⁸ He also acquired many books to add to his personal library back in Virginia. The years spent in Paris, with its abundant intellectual and artistic life, the extended trip through France and into Italy, and occasional short excursions, basically served as Jefferson’s version of the Grand Tour, providing the man with considerable further extension of his cultural knowledge, not to mention a great deal of enjoyment.

B. French Influences on Jefferson’s Beliefs

Through examination of the works of Jeffersonian historians, and also his own writings, one may discern various widely differing sources and types of French influence on Jefferson’s thinking. Some aspects are well documented and fairly easily identifiable, the specific details of others are either sadly lost in time, or else are so entangled together that one may only surmise rather than readily discern conclusively.

As a starting point, one must acknowledge the sizeable contributions of the great French political philosophers of the broader era. Among the many various poles of extraordinary learning, advancement in the sciences and humanities, and philosophical development that occurred in the Age of Enlightenment, more than a few were Frenchmen. Descartes, Voltaire, Montesquieu, Rousseau (technically Swiss, but French-speaking Swiss, resolutely Franco-oriented, and long resident in Paris), and Diderot rank among the great intellectual personages of the entire period. Some of their more significant contributions to Jefferson’s ongoing consideration of political and

¹⁸ Ibid., 83.

philosophical matters have already been mentioned above, in Chapter 4. While it is true that much of Jefferson's engagement with their ideas, through their written works, occurred in years well prior to his being stationed in Paris, one must acknowledge that French influence on Jefferson's views was indeed significant – in some ways clarifying his views about humanity and politics in general, in other ways strengthening his beliefs regarding the rightness of what had already been accomplished in the United States.

Jefferson's constant vigilance for American's interests in all his relations with France accounted for the paradox contained in his personal reactions to the French Revolution. The Revolution had a far greater effect upon his opinions of events in America than it had upon his opinions of contemporaneous developments in France.¹⁹

One of the areas of perhaps more immediate pertinence to this subject concerns Jefferson's direct personal interactions with various French philosophical and political figures during the years he spent there. As noted previously, Jefferson led an active social life in Paris, attending a variety of functions and social events, regularly including the theatre, salons, and dinner engagements, much of which he engaged in fairly reluctantly, as he usually did not care much for what he perceived to be the shallowness of the upper classes; attending such functions was simply a requirement of his diplomatic position. Considerably more significant, however, not to mention far more interesting and valuable to Jefferson himself, he was a frequent and congenial host; not much pleased him better than an evening spent dining well and conversing with a few close friends.

The conversation during an evening spent chez Jefferson assuredly would not have been limited to superficial frivolities, but most often constituted a kind of lively,

¹⁹ Kaplan, *Jefferson and France*, 35.

intense, fascinating philosophical salon, thoroughly investigating, debating, and dissecting the political matters in the air at the time, of which the dramatic, continually unfolding events of the French Revolution would have provided an abundance. Sadly to the historian, only the scantest of records of what exactly was discussed during such evenings are available; one wishes a detailed ongoing recording could have been kept, as they must have been captivating indeed. With such frequent and extensive political conversation with some of the leading French intellectuals and political leaders of the day, among whom Lafayette, Mirabeau, Condorcet, and La Rochefoucauld were some of his particular favorites, Jefferson undoubtedly had almost constant opportunity to continually reexamine, adjust, and refine his political views, as has been his wont. During his years in Paris, leading up to the outbreak of the French Revolution, his close ties with Lafayette provided perhaps the most notable forms of influence, in both directions.

Lafayette played a prominent role in the French reform movement, and Jefferson's views often reflected his friend's opinion, just as Lafayette was influenced by Jefferson. Both believed that France's centralized government was striving for more popular support at the same time that America's popular leaders were working for more centralized government. And both were advocates of a new constitution and a bill of rights in both countries.²⁰

The actual events leading to the French Revolution, as they progressed towards their climax, provided a further source of influence on Jefferson. One can imagine almost no better possible setting for a figure as entranced by politics as was Jefferson, than the Paris he saw. Along with the near-constant drama, the flurry of ideas and perspectives, the intense focus on many of the very political matters that most concerned him, Paris in

²⁰ James Morton Smith, ed., *The Republic of Letters: The Correspondence between Thomas Jefferson and James Madison 1776-1826*, vol. I (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1995), 527.

the years leading up to his departure in 1789 also provided Jefferson a remarkable opportunity to observe, from as near a vantage point as possible, the unfolding of a real political crisis, one in which the stakes could not have been higher. That the entire process was in many ways managed by the French political leadership about as badly as possibly could be, was not a misfortune for him. Especially to one of his great interest in political matters, and also of a highly scientific turn of mind, the utter mismanagement of a situation can often be even more valuable than one that is handled adroitly; as humans we can learn much from seeing mistakes being made, especially serious ones.

In a number of ways, the circumstances in France were even more dramatic to observe than had been Jefferson's experiences through the heady days leading up to the American Revolution. Events and developments in Paris unfolded continually, even daily, as the nation lurched from crisis to crisis, from one failed solution to another, ultimately to spiral uncontrollably towards the eventual inferno that it became during the most horrific stages of *La Terreur* in the summer of 1794. If nothing else, Jefferson's close-up view of the actions of the French government during his years in Paris – the often reactionary, draconian, maladroit responses to the events of the era as they unfolded, the unending series of failed plans for resolving the nation's fiscal crisis and political deadlocks – reaffirmed in Jefferson the beliefs that the methods and principles of the *Ancien Régime* did not constitute the right path. Those ways were not only inherently unjust, they were also revealing themselves to be functionally incompetent, as shown by the ever-increasing, rather than lessening, nature of the national crisis.

One particular example of direct influence on Jefferson that was produced by the events of the French Revolution, coupled with the extensive discussions of his informal political salon, came in the form of the passage and publication of the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* (*Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen*) by the *Assemblée Nationale* in August of 1789. This landmark document in the history of human rights, not to mention the overall development of political thought in general, in its 17 articles established for the French nation a formally codified set of fundamental rights for all people, including inherent personal freedom, equality, basic human rights, sovereignty in the populace rather than the ruler, equality both under the law and of taxation, freedom of religion, speech, and the press, among others. (Jefferson's substantive personal involvement and influence in the creation of this code is discussed in the following chapter below.) A significant effect on Jefferson of the enactment of the *Déclaration* was to reinforce his conviction in the need for, and to reinvigorate his actions towards achieving the passage of, an equivalent set of measures in the U.S. Constitution, which at the time still lacked such provisions. He renewed his efforts for the adoption of an American Bill of Rights, especially through his correspondence with James Madison, delineating his views as to what provisions should be included and the justifications for them, to considerable effect.

Jefferson's arguments confirmed Madison in his judgment and spurred him forward in his efforts to redeem his pledge to work for amendments. His [Madison's] sponsorship of these amendments makes him indisputably "the Father of the Bill of Rights."²¹

²¹ Smith, *The Republic of Letters*, 600.

An entirely different sort of influence, from those he encountered while in Paris itself, arose during Jefferson's extended travels France in 1787, discussed earlier in this chapter. More comfortable once again, just as he invariably was in his own farmland Virginia, in the French countryside than in Paris, Jefferson saw in the rural populace many of the same qualities that he so respected and admired in the yeoman farmers back home – tenacity, responsibility, industriousness, self-reliance, perseverance in the face of incredible hardship and oppression. Yet at the same time he observed, in the truly wretched conditions and crushing poverty of the French peasantry, a populace even more ill-treated, oppressed, and forlorn than had been true for American farmers under British rule. Jefferson's sympathies were continually aroused by the destitution he saw across rural France, his admiration raised for people who could valiantly continue to struggle on in the face of such privation, and his convictions redoubled that the right path of governance was one that was structured to accord to such people – France's would-be version of the yeoman farmer – the sorts of fundamental human rights he believed in, and at least decent opportunity to achieve some degree of prosperity. Needless to say, the experience only heightened his disgust and animosity towards the rapacity and absurdly overprivileged position of the French aristocracy.

Finally, Jefferson garnered from his time in France one further sort of influence, the fulfilling of an aspiration he'd held even prior to his arrival for France, and hoped to attain while there. One of the principal facets of his entire political philosophy was the belief that tenets such as equality, fundamental human rights, the desire for government responsible to its citizenry, were in fact universal, rather than ideals merely confined to

Americans. He hoped to find solid verification of the truth of that universality. By extension, he hoped to find further affirmation that the American Revolution – a movement that had been philosophically built upon belief in that universality – had been the right course of action. If those same principles which had been relied upon for justification for the American independence movement, and upon which the new nation’s government was subsequently built, were to be widely embraced by another, major nation, then the rightness of those principles would be further substantiated, particularly their asserted universality – views which were shared by his cohorts among the French reformers as well:

Deeply and romantically committed to the American experiment, Condorcet was convinced of its decisive impact on the Old World. Both he and Jefferson saw the American and French revolutions as crucially linked in their success or failure. Jefferson’s obsession with the idea of the French Revolution as a validation of American ideals would fester long after he left Paris.²²

Jefferson’s observations during his time and travels in France – particularly of the conditions in which the French country peasantry existed, with whom he had a natural affinity and sympathy, and who were trapped in a state of eternal penury and virtual serfdom – solidified his beliefs that a society dominated by overbearing government and aristocracy was a malevolent state of affairs. Such views provided for him abundant affirmation of the rightness of the new course that had been chosen in the fledgling United States, confirming his intentions to continue pressing forward along that path, which he did throughout the remainder of his political career including his two-term presidency.

²² Adams, *The Paris Years of Thomas Jefferson*, 6.

CHAPTER 7

JEFFERSON'S INFLUENCE ON THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

The ways in which Jefferson influenced the French Revolution may be divided into two broad categories: direct and indirect. The former were ways in which some clear, direct link may be established between himself and either the events, or the personages, central to the movement; the latter include ways in which his work affected the affair somehow, in a more nebulous, ambiguous manner. Multiple examples of each existed, although in some aspects the distinctions between direct and indirect effect is rather blurred, and one ought properly perhaps to think more in terms of some sort of combination of the two characterizations.

A. Forms of Indirect Influence

Any discussion regarding Jefferson's influence on the French Revolution must surely begin with the American Revolution. None would ever go anywhere near laying credit for the whole episode at Jefferson's feet, obviously, but as he was one of its most principal figures – whose actions and writings did much to shape the particular course it took, and shape the nature of the new system of American government which was created subsequently – thus does he rightfully deserve some considerable measure of credit for any extended consequences which the entire movement may have produced elsewhere. And the American Revolution was indeed one of the factors holding some significant degree of influence over the French Revolution in various ways. It was widely known among many portions of the French populace at the time, especially once French military forces entered the fray on the side of the Americans. It served as an inspiration to many

different types of French people – to political opposition leaders, to anti-royalists, to anti-aristocrats, to political radicals, to the downtrodden peasantry, to impoverished urban masses. An oppressed people inevitably needs a source for hope before they will act. The American revolt against their British overlords, and subsequent American victory, served as examples of what could be accomplished: eternal, hopeless subjection to the oppressive dominance of the *Ancien Régime* was not the only possibility and did not have to be accepted unchallenged; change was at least possible. The Americans had shown that an unjust and tyrannical ruling power could be cast off, forcibly if necessary, and replaced with something far better.

Jefferson himself assuredly viewed the situation in France in such a light, a view wholly supported by his inextinguishable faith that what had been accomplished in America represented the right course for people anywhere:

Other Americans shared his commitment to that revolution, but with varying degrees of enthusiasm and with differing ideas in mind. Jefferson was virtually unique in the strength and passion of his commitment to one crowning idea: that this revolution was universal, not limited to the American people or the American experience. Jefferson insisted that the American Revolution was the forerunner of an age of democratic revolution that could conceivably embrace the globe.¹

Besides being a military conflict in which the underdog emerged victorious, in David-Goliath fashion, the American Revolution was of course equally notable for being embroiled in sometimes fiercely contentious argumentation over a wide array of political and social issues. Herein lie the sources of much of what aroused interest and appeal for broad swaths of the French people – for those actively interested and engaged in political

¹ Bernstein, *Thomas Jefferson*, xii.

matters, such as members of political clubs in Paris and other cities, for members of the bourgeois classes who had achieved some degree of prosperity but resented aristocratic monopolizing of rights and political power, for political radicals, and even for the oppressed peasantry and urban masses. Much of that interest and appeal derived from the fact that those political and social issues on which the American cause had so focused were largely the very same issues that were of greatest interest, concern, and contention for the French as well: equality of persons, fundamental rights, political and economic opportunity, equal treatment under the law, suffrage and participation in governance, and government responsive and responsible to the governed. Not only were the issues largely the same in both countries, but the American process offered potential answers to the matters under question, answers which were in many cases appealing to the French population. Here again, Jefferson must be accorded his due share of credit for influence on the French. The grand conversation that had unfolded in America during the previous decade had certainly had many voices; among other political luminaries of the era such as Franklin, Madison, both Samuel and John Adams, Hamilton, Paine, Henry, and Washington, Jefferson's had consistently been one of the most prominent, well-reasoned, articulate, and convincing. Many of those possible answers that appealed to Frenchmen had in fact been supplied by Jefferson. Both in the audaciousness of the acts of revolting against the British and then defeating them, and in carrying out the long political debate and process that first laid the foundation for that revolt and followed it up with fashioning a democratic form of government, the Americans presented a model for carrying out a thorough overhaul of their political and societal circumstances, which much of the French

populace esteemed and felt they perhaps could, and many believed should, emulate: “America, in the minds of Lafayette and DuPont, had achieved the dreams of the French philosophers of the last generation.”²

B. Forms of Direct Influence

In terms of more direct forms of influence that Jefferson may have had on various political figures and processes of the French Revolutionary Era, we look once again in multiple directions. Some of these were more overt in nature, others were deliberately kept far more private by Jefferson and his cohorts, even substantially concealed.

The frequently occurring evenings where Jefferson hosted friends and contemporaries stand out prominently once again. Not only did such gatherings, filled with political conversation and debate, influence Jefferson, they stand as one of the more significant ways in which he exerted his own influence on the revolutionary process unfolding in France. Jefferson’s ongoing informal political salon would have perhaps been equally fascinating, but far less meaningful, had the attendees been less illustrious. The frequent presence of leading figures such as Lafayette, Mirabeau, and Condorcet, among many others, meant that the ideas and principles discussed during such evenings would come to have effect on events in France considerably greater than might be expected from a few pleasant hours spent in the company of friends over weekly dinner.

Condorcet, for instance, was a philosopher, mathematician, government minister, and tireless supporter of liberal causes who would go on to play a leading role in the Revolution, as representative for Paris and later secretary of the *Assemblée Nationale*; he

² Kaplan, *Jefferson and France*, 23.

was later arrested, as the Revolution moved into its more extremist phases, and died in prison. Mirabeau, also a member and later president of the *Assemblée*, was a renowned public orator and champion of the people. Immensely popular, he advocated a moderate path of political reform, and contributed to the drafting of the *Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen*. His relatively early death, which resulted in a large public funeral and burial in the *Panthéon* as a national hero, meant that he did not go through the most violent later stages of the Revolution. Lafayette, already a national hero due to his successes leading French troops in the American war against the British, served in the *Assemblée des Notables* of 1787 and the Estates-General in 1789, strongly advocating for increased rights for the Third Estate. Siding with reform-minded elements, he being one of the minority of the aristocratic Second Estate to espouse liberal causes, Lafayette was among the leaders of the group of representatives who broke away and proclaimed themselves the *Assemblée Nationale* in June of 1789, once it had become clear that the Estates-General would accomplish nothing. Like Condorcet, Lafayette would also later fall afoul of the more extreme stages of the Revolution, and spent five years in prison.

Meeting thus on a frequent basis throughout his five years in Paris, with like-minded leaders of the effort for reform in France – including, among others, Lafayette, Mirabeau, Condorcet, La Rochefoucauld, Barnave, and the Archbishop of Bordeaux³ – afforded Jefferson plentiful opportunities to exert influence on the course of political events as they unfolded. “Jefferson’s fascination with the efflorescence of the French Revolution directly affected the advice he freely offered to the architects of the new

³ Ibid., 34.

government.”⁴ One such evening, where Jefferson was “hosting a dinner at Lafayette’s request for eight members of the National Assembly who were debating constitutional provisions”⁵ included discussion of the outlines of a constitution for France, about which he later concluded “in short, ours has been professedly their model.”⁶

Jefferson accomplished more of the same sorts of influence through his nearly endless correspondence with these and many other leading political figures. Both his correspondence and the advice he gave in personal conversations covered a very wide range of political matters both ideological and practical:

In 1787 he considered tax reforms and provincial assemblies to be the first step in France’s slow evolution toward constitutional government; in 1788 he advanced the progress of her evolution by suggesting a proto-parliament in the form of an Estates-General that possessed the right of taxation; in June, 1789 he perceived the Estates-General as a full-blown legislature; and in August, 1789 he accepted the new government’s promulgation of a Declaration of Rights and plans for a constitution that would even limit the king’s power over foreign relations.⁷

The collective body of advice and suggestions that Jefferson made over time to the various French leaders with whom he met and conversed and corresponded, definitely had an overarching goal in his mind, despite the sometimes distressing developments that occurred over the course of the entire affair:

Although his changing views of aspects of French political reform reflected an instability which was undoubtedly the result of emotions unleashed by the Revolution, the ultimate object of his advice remained

⁴ Ibid., 34.

⁵ Smith, *The Republic of Letters*, 603.

⁶ Jefferson, letter to James Madison, August 28, 1789, in Smith, *The Republic of Letters*, 628.

⁷ Kaplan, *Jefferson and France*, 34.

unchanged: the creation of a constitutional monarchy modeled after Britain's but purged of British flaws.⁸

Jefferson did not expect that the French would be eager to fully follow the American republican model of government and do away with the monarchy entirely, given that it had been in place in France for centuries, but instead envisioned a transition to a constitutional monarchy with considerably limited powers, which would still afford the French populace the rights he firmly believed they should be accorded.

In his frequent meetings, interactions, and correspondence with the men who would come to be some of the most prominent figures advancing the cause of political reform in France, Jefferson can easily be seen to have been overstepping the bounds of what constituted acceptable activity for a foreign diplomat. Members of diplomatic corps were traditionally expected – and often legally bound – to limit their activities to their official functions respecting the rightful business of their own nations; to become enmeshed in the internal affairs of the nation in which they are posted, essentially as a guest, was certainly contrary to international diplomatic protocol. Engaging in such activities to the extent of advising on and advocating for wholesale change in the domestic political system of the host nation, was contrary to the point of being egregious. For all the nobility of Jefferson's beliefs and intentions, his actions in France definitely were well beyond acceptable behavior for a diplomat. He did make certain concessions to the rules of diplomatic protocol – declining to appear in any public, official capacity as a collaborator with French reformers – but if the full, true nature of his engagements with revolutionary leaders in France had been overt and known by the official leaders of the

⁸ Ibid., 34.

ruling regime, one suspects that he would almost certainly have been expelled from the country, if not arrested outright and tried for plotting against the king.

To turn from Jefferson's direct personal interactions, to his written endeavors, the *Declaration of Independence* was, of all his formal writings, in some ways far more directly pertinent to the French Revolution than any other. Its brevity makes it, to be sure, a far, far less developed, less detailed, less comprehensive work than the far-reaching *Notes on the State of Virginia*. The *Declaration* served, nonetheless, as one of the significant sources of inspiration for the French movement. As has already been mentioned above, Jefferson's (principal) authorship of the American declaration was virtually unknown in France at the time, thus according him no personal credit during his years there; the document itself was, however, widely distributed and known throughout numerous quarters of the French populace, particularly in pro-reform circles. It served as an inspiration to the French, and helped shape the form and political principles of their revolution. The *Declaration* presents the essences, in concise form, of the principles that formed the philosophical foundation of the new nation of the United States, principles which many in France took to just as eagerly and steadfastly. It is no mere coincidence by any means, that the *Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen* so closely resembles both the language and the substance of its American precursor.

Part of that resemblance between the two foundational documents derived from the parallels that existed between the situations in the two lands – the majority of the respective populaces in each country had been faced with largely the same sets of issues and grievances against their current ruling regimes – part of the resemblance was due to

the need, therefore, for very similar solutions to the political issues at hand. And a portion of the similarity was the result of the overall pool of political and philosophic ideas that had been produced by the various figures of the Enlightenment, ideas which were as well known to many of the politically minded in France as they had been to Americans, and which independently held similar appeal in the minds of many in each locale. French and American reformers shared similar concerns, needed largely similar solutions, had familiarity with similar sets of ideological material; it is hardly surprising that the documents they produced in response to their respective challenges were therefore similar in nature.

Yet even accounting for that expected similarity of thought, the two documents still bear far too much resemblance, both in substance and in the exact language they each employ, to have been composed entirely independently from each other. And the historical record bears this out, revealing perhaps the most direct form of influence that Jefferson had on the French Revolution. One of the principal authors of the *Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen* was Lafayette (the final version of the document, as published and passed by the *Assemblée Nationale* in August of 1789, was an amalgamated product of several different hands, thus no single person alone merits complete credit for its composition). Lafayette had produced a draft of the *Déclaration* which ultimately formed the essential core of the final version, with certain additions and changes made by various other representatives in the *Assemblée Nationale*, including Mirabeau significantly. At times, Lafayette and Jefferson had in fact worked together very closely in preparing this draft of the document over the weeks prior to its passage.

Jefferson and Lafayette had extensively discussed the various philosophical and political matters that would find expression in its constituent articles, with Jefferson taking an active advisory role. Jefferson sent an early draft version (along with a similar effort by the philosophe Richard Gem) to Madison for his consideration in January of 1789, noting in his accompanying letter:

Every body here is trying their hands at forming declarations of rights. As something of that kind is going on with you also, I send you two specimens from hence. The one is by our friend [Lafayette] of whom I have just spoken. You will see that it contains the essential principles of ours [i.e., the Virginia Declaration of Rights of 1776] accommodated as much as could be to the actual state of things here.⁹

The resemblance between the two declarations was, therefore, entirely consequential rather than coincidental: the one is substantially modeled directly on the other. The similarity in substance, in perspective, and in language, is therefore entirely what one might expect. Along with having significant points in common – including equality, rights of life and liberty, and the just origin of government deriving from the governed – the echoes to be found in the language used by the French proclamation and by Jefferson are at times striking. In the *Déclaration*, the rights of man are characterized as “natural” and “inalienable”,¹⁰ just as with Jefferson’s American version, sovereignty “resides essentially in the nation”,¹¹ and law is “the expression of the general will.”¹² The French version does in fact extend considerably beyond its American predecessor in certain areas, incorporating the bill of rights that was still lacking in the United States,

⁹ Jefferson, letter to James Madison, January 12, 1789, in Smith, *The Republic of Letters*, 583.

¹⁰ Marquis de Lafayette, Honoré Mirabeau, Jean-Joseph Mounier, *Déclaration des droits de l’homme et du citoyen*, Preamble (Paris, 1789).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, Article III.

¹² *Ibid.*, Article VI.

and which Jefferson would almost immediately turn to advocating for vociferously. Both the American and French declarations still stand today as landmarks in the history of political affairs, particularly regarding human rights, were subsequently emulated in many other nations, and still stand today as the keystone documents on which their respective nations were built politically. The adoption of the *Déclaration* provided the reform-minded parties of the French political scene with a dynamic, noble set of principles which they could embrace, which they could rally around, and to which they could garner widespread popular support for moving their campaign forward and achieve substantive political change in France, just as Jefferson's version had done a decade earlier for the American cause.

To account for the full extent, however, of Jefferson's influence on events in France, it must further be noted that his involvement was not limited merely to advising and discussing the pertinent elements of the *Déclaration* with Lafayette as the latter was composing it. A close look at one of the surviving original drafts suggests that certain handwritten comments in the margins, suggesting changes and clarifications, may in fact be in Jefferson's own hand. One historian details the degree of collaboration between the two men:

A letter of Lafayette to Jefferson dated Versailles, July 4, contains an interesting postscriptum: "Will you send me the bill of Rights with your notes." A subsequent letter is even more pressing: "To-morrow I propose my bill of rights about the middle of the sitting; be pleased to consider it again and make your observations."¹³

¹³ Gilbert Chinard, *Thomas Jefferson: The Apostle of Americanism* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1929), 232.

Furthermore, two surviving examples of Lafayette's draft text of the *Déclaration*, found among Jefferson's papers, are noted:

One of the versions probably antedated by several months the meeting of the National Assembly. Jefferson had it in his hands as early as the beginning of 1789 and he even sent a copy of it to Madison on January 12. The second text, far more important, was annotated by Jefferson in pencil. Although the handwriting is faint, it is perfectly legible. The emendations and corrections he suggested are quite characteristic.¹⁴

The final version of the *Déclaration*, as passed in 1789 by the *Assemblée Nationale* after considerable discussion and revision, and officially credited to Lafayette, Mirabeau, and Mounier collectively, was doubtlessly influenced by numerous figures both French and foreign, but Jefferson's role in its composition clearly was central and substantive.

If engaging in dinner-table conversation of political matters with reformist political leaders constituted diplomatically questionable involvement from Jefferson, then actively helping to prepare a statement of principles that ran in direct opposition to the established political order in France, which the *Déclaration* surely was, goes several steps beyond merely being questionable. Jefferson's intentions were noble indeed, centered on humane concern and achieving equality and basic rights for all France's people, but if the penmanship was indeed his, Jefferson's actions while acting in capacity as a diplomat would certainly appear to have been sailing perilously close to the wind. His courage and integrity, in working continually for causes he believed in strongly and that were entirely noble, were most commendable.

¹⁴ Ibid., 232.

We cannot rightly call Jefferson anything close to responsible, in the strict sense of the term, for the course of the French Revolution as it unfolded, for the exact nature of those events, or for the character of the political debate that occurred throughout the French society, around which the active events of the era swirled. But it is not at all difficult to recognize signs of Jefferson's influence permeating the affair in numerous ways and directions. Many of the themes at the center of that societal debate were the same issues and ideas that had been at the center of the American affair as well. Much of the language used, and conclusions reached, in the French Revolutionary Era, had decidedly Jeffersonian overtones to them – not by accident or mere coincidence. Some of that echoing obviously would have been simply the result of the two movements focusing on very similar sets of political issues, some the result of the latter effort naturally mimicking of its forerunner. But with Jefferson himself physically on the scene through so much of the early stages of its unfolding, it takes relatively little effort to perceive his presence directly influencing the conversation.

CHAPTER 8

AFTERMATH OF JEFFERSON'S TIME IN FRANCE

Jefferson left Paris in October of 1789 to return to the United States to attend to various matters relating principally to his financial affairs, believing he would return before long, yet “without realizing it, the forty-six-year-old envoy had finished his European education.”¹ A remarkable education it had been, one filled with his typically large helping of hard work, considerable achievement to the benefit of the affairs of his own nation, the enjoyment of artistic splendors beyond his expectations, far more turmoil than he could possibly have expected at the outset, the continued evolving of his own political and philosophical ideas and perspectives, and the further maturation of an exceptional personality. It was undoubtedly a chapter in his life which far exceeded, in importance and certainly in drama, anything that he or anyone else could have anticipated when he embarked for Paris five years previously. It was also serendipitous, that he should have had the opportunity to witness the dramatic events of the early stages of the French Revolution from such a close view. And it was quite possibly rather fortunate – for his own safety, if nothing else – that he departed when he did, before events spun completely out of control.

A. Events of the French Revolution Following Jefferson's Departure

The progress of the French Revolution following Jefferson's departure was surely not a path that he would have foreseen. Some degree of progress seemed possible, perhaps even likely, through the first year-plus after he left, towards achieving substantial

¹ Adams, *The Paris Years of Thomas Jefferson*, 24.

political, social, and economic reforms, within an atmosphere of at least reasonable calm, productive deliberate political negotiation, and general sanity – converting the French political system into a constitutional monarchy with considerably circumscribed powers, for instance, was one of the major plans for reform which a number of political leaders, including Lafayette, worked to achieve. Before long, however, the entire situation began to spiral out of control. The inability of the various political factions to find common ground and room for compromise, the unwavering intransigence of most of the privileged elite towards making any substantive concessions to reformers, the rapidly increasing frustration of reform groups, and ever-worsening conditions for the still-impoorished mass of the populace, all combined to spur the nation further and further down the road to catastrophe. Frustrations over the ongoing political deadlock turned to increasing animosity between political camps, and rising generalized tension, spurring especially the reformist political factions into more direct and drastic steps, often through mob action. Animosity soon became open hostilities, more radical factions began to see their power and support rise greatly among the people, especially as food shortages riots continued, and within the first couple of years the entire movement had transformed into a situation where moderate courses were no longer possible, moderate voices were ignored or even persecuted, and the nation lurched into pandemonium.

Table 2 shows the principal events of the height of the French Revolution, following the storming of the Bastille – memorialized as the ‘official’ onset of the Revolution – the march on Versailles and forced relocation of Louis XVI to Paris, all in 1789. A glance at the list of events clearly reveals a nation tumbling into total chaos,

particularly as the more radical factions of the movement seized control: multiple episodes of mass rioting, widespread arrests and executions of aristocrats, the regicide, massacres, foreign military invasion, open civil war across much of France, culminating in the utter bloodbath that the revolution evolved into during the months of the frenzied era of *La Terreur* in late 1793 through the first half of 1794.

Table 2. Principal Events of the French Revolution After Jefferson’s Departure²

1789

November 2	Property of the Church nationalized and confiscated
December	National Assembly determines only “active” (i.e., propertied or monied) citizens may vote

1790

February 13	Religious orders suppressed
May 19	National Assembly abolishes nobility
August 16	<i>Parlements</i> abolished

1791

February 28	Day of Daggers (<i>Journée des Poignards</i>): 400 aristocrats arrested
June 20-25	Royal family flees to Varennes, forced to return to Paris

1792

January-March	Additional food riots in Paris
April	Executions by guillotine begin
July 30	Austria and Prussia invade France, start of French Revolutionary Wars
August 10-13	Insurrection of 10 August: Tuileries Palace stormed, Louis XVI arrested
August 22	Riots spread from Paris across France
September 2-7	September Massacres, 1300+ inmates executed
September 21	National Convention proclaims French Republic, abolishes monarchy

1793

January 21	Louis XVI executed
March 7	Royalist counter-revolutionary revolt (<i>Guerre de Vendée</i>) in western France begins
March 11	Revolutionary Tribunal established in Paris, later spearhead of <i>La Terreur</i>
June 24	Constitution of 1793 ratified

² Doyle, *Oxford History of the French Revolution*, 437-443.

July 27	Robespierre elected to Committee of Public Safety (<i>Comité de salut public</i>)
September 5	Reign of Terror (<i>La Terreur</i>) begins
October 10	Convention suspends 1793 Constitution, declares France will be “revolutionary until the peace”
October 16	Queen Marie Antoinette executed
December	<i>Montagnards</i> rise to political dominance under leadership of Robespierre
<u>1794</u>	
February	Final “pacification” of the Vendée ends counter-revolutionary revolt after 170,000 to 300,000+ casualties
March-April	Revolutionary leaders including Hébert, Danton, Desmoulins guillotined
June 26	French army defeats Austrians at Battle of Fleurus
June-July	<i>La Grande Terreur</i> , frenetic height of the Reign of Terror
July 28	Robespierre guillotined without trial; <i>La Terreur</i> ends after 40,000+ executions across France
<u>1795</u>	
May 31	Paris Revolutionary Tribunal suppressed
August 22	Constitution of 1795 ratified
November 2	Directory (<i>Directoire</i>) replaces the National Convention
<u>1799</u>	
November 9	<i>Coup d'état du 18 brumaire</i> : <i>Directoire</i> overthrown by Napoléon Bonaparte, replaced by the Consulate; end of the French Revolution

Source: Doyle, *Oxford History of the French Revolution*, 437-443.

The most drastic, violent stages of the Revolution would come to a close, with some semblance of calm restored under the *Directoire*, following the execution of Robespierre and the ending of the draconian revolutionary tribunals. But even then, instability continued for some years, as the *Directoire* did not prove to be a satisfactorily effective solution for the nation’s problems. The chaos of the 1790s really only came to a close with any permanence with Napoléon’s *coup d’état* in late 1799, which essentially made him dictator. Accurate figures as to casualties during the revolutionary years will never be known, but estimates range as high as well over one million.

B. Jefferson's Views on Later Developments of the French Revolution

Jefferson was a staunch admirer and supporter of the French Revolution for quite some time. His reaction to the earliest stages of the revolt was decidedly positive, describing "...in France such events as will be for ever memorable in history,"³ and also that "...the revolution in France has gone on with the most unexampled success hitherto."⁴ He continued to see in the movement a valiant struggle of a largely oppressed populace to gain a political system which was fair and in which they would be treated equally and be accorded a decent set of basic rights. He acknowledged that some degree of conflict and bloodshed would in all likelihood be encountered along the way, but deemed that to be a tolerable cost where so much more stood to be gained. He certainly approved of the nature of the political debate being conducted, the issues being discussed, and the solutions being proposed by many of the reformers. And he believed optimistically that, ultimately, things would work out well in the end, and France would emerge from the process as a much better, stronger nation, with at least considerable resemblance to the sorts of positive political changes that Americans had seen.

To Maria Cosway, the Virginian wrote how fortunate he had been to "see in the course of fourteen years two such revolutions that were never before seen." ...He still imagined that a resolute application of rational political strategy would calm the gods of change "without bloodshed." Reason and legitimacy would triumph over terror, although a little punitive violence in the name of liberty, judiciously applied, was justified even for Jefferson.⁵

³ Jefferson, letter to James Madison, July 22-23, 1789, in Smith, *The Republic of Letters*, 624.

⁴ Jefferson, letter to James Madison, May 11, 1789, in Smith, *The Republic of Letters*, 609.

⁵ Adams, *The Paris Years of Thomas Jefferson*, 5. [Jefferson cited in letter to Maria Cosway, July 25, 1789. Papers 15:305].

As the situation turned increasingly chaotic and violent, however, and then tumbled into mass carnage, Jefferson's approval of events in France waned; there came a point at which there had simply been too much bloodshed, and relatively little gained in the process to balance it all out and provide enduring justification for the turbulent events of the Revolution. As the carnage mounted drastically and chaos reigned in France, he recognized that the once-promising revolt/reform effort had veered off course down a path into little more than vengeful, virtually unchecked extremist butchery. The hegemony of the *Ancien Régime* had indeed been overcome, the monarchy overthrown, most of the aristocracy either slaughtered or else in flight, but few would have claimed particularly in the most vicious phases of 1794 that a genuinely stable, functioning, civilized democratic society had been achieved in its stead, one poised to deliver any promise of enduring prosperity, equality, and beneficence to the population. While still of a mind to support the putative goals of the Revolution, its justification in being set in motion, and the principles which supported it, Jefferson recognized that the results, at least as viewed in the mid-1790s, had largely not realized their potential. A once-promising movement aimed at effecting substantive, lasting societal reconfiguration on far more positive lines, had descended into near-anarchy and massacre.

That the immediate outcomes of the two revolutions should have differed so greatly, with the Americans for the most part settling down into an orderly process of nation-building while the French descended into a vortex of brutal chaos, did not come as much of a surprise to Jefferson – tragic and lamentable, perhaps, but not all that surprising. Some crucial differences existed between the two populaces. So many

Americans owned their own land, and thus had a vested interest in calm and stability, and relatively so many had experience participating in government in one way or another – the British may have long been the ultimate overlords, but the great physical distance of the colonies from Britain had meant that much of the business of day-to-day governing had been carried out by common folk through colonial legislatures, local town councils, and the like. The French, however, almost entirely lacked both of these advantages: the vast majority of the peasantry was landless, and government affairs had been the exclusive province of the upper classes for generations. With most of the French populace therefore devoid both of experience in governing society, and of the economic interest in stability that comes from owning one's own farmland, it was hardly startling that their revolution devolved into pandemonium rather than moving quickly into steady industriousness, as had the American effort. The difference in outcomes largely confirmed for Jefferson his beliefs that American society was fundamentally virtuous and beneficent, but that French society had long since reached a state of thoroughgoing corruption from which it would doubtlessly take quite some time to recover.

A longer-term view of the French movement in its ultimate entirety produces a far more satisfying verdict, although it would take considerable time for the promise of the Revolution to be fulfilled. Napoleon's ensuing period of leadership was effectively dictatorial, if in a somewhat benevolent form, and the French monarchy would return to power on more than one occasion through the nineteenth century – neither of which can be seen to have constituted ideally functioning democratic governance along the lines of the American model which Jefferson championed. But it must be acknowledged that the

Revolution altered the overall political conversation and reality in France, and set the stage for a new political agenda. The French common people had made it clear that they would not docilely and eternally accept oppression and exclusion from political power and rights, at the hands of the elite. France would ultimately see such reordering on a lasting basis later in following decades, as it transformed into the modern democratic society that it remains today.

C. Later Manifestations of Influence on Jefferson's Perspectives

Jefferson's experience in France did produce some lasting influence on his political views, which we can see manifested in some of his later political actions in various areas, notably during his two presidential terms and thereafter. The affirmation that he sought – that the political course of structuring nations based on societal equality, comprehensive human rights, and democratic government was indeed the proper path, and that the tenets of such a path were in fact appropriate and desired for peoples elsewhere outside of America – was indeed confirmed. The lives and lot of common folk *did* matter – whether in America, France, or wherever else – and structuring a society in such a way that they would have at least the possibility of leading decent lives, perhaps with even some degree of prosperity, was indeed the right course of action. Jefferson would adhere to that fundamental perspective and set of values, throughout the remainder of his political career. He would continue to work towards achieving further means of assuring for the populace those rights, ability to participate politically, and opportunity to flourish.

His determination to accomplish such goals may be seen in his emphatic support of the Bill of Rights, and in the founding of the Democratic-Republican political party, established to counter the Hamiltonian Federalists, strive to prevent excessive political power from concentrating in the national government, and work to promote the causes of the yeoman-farmer, common-folk classes throughout rural America. Two notable examples of work during his later years, aimed at bettering opportunities for common people, stand out in particular. The first is, of course, what has often been cited as the most significant accomplishment of his presidency: the Louisiana Purchase. Few single acts by anyone over the entire course of the history of the United States would ever have as ultimately significant an effect upon the nation. The acquisition of this immense mass of former French land to the west of the then-extents of the United States nearly doubled the physical size of the nation, encompassing most or all of what would eventually become thirteen states through what remains the agricultural heartland of the country. By the time of the purchase in 1803, it was abundantly clear that the population of the nation was growing rapidly; space had already become seriously crowded within the original states along the Atlantic seaboard, and the areas beyond the Appalachians were already beginning to fill as well.

One of the primary requirements critical to achieving the widespread existence of that flourishing class of yeoman farmers whom Jefferson so admired and respected, was assuring sufficient quantity of land. Jefferson's purchase from Napoleon opened up enormously vast new territories – more than 828,000 square miles – without which the American great westward expansion would have been forced to halt at the banks of the

Mississippi. Furthermore, one may also recognize in Jefferson's purchase an example suggesting a principal catalyst for the eventual American territorial push all the way across the continent. Jefferson's belief in the need for vast amounts of land was so convinced that he was willing to make the Louisiana Purchase despite such action being effectively beyond the limits of Constitutional permissibility – an act that brought him considerable criticism and political opposition, but which he steadfastly defended as the right step nonetheless. Such land was necessary, if America was to become the empire of liberty that he envisioned, to accommodate the large and growing body of independent yeoman farmers which he was convinced would and should form the majority of that glorious empire to be.

In an entirely different vein, it is also possible to see in Jefferson's founding of the University of Virginia – the principal accomplishment of his post-presidency later years – yet another example of his determination to offer opportunity to people of all stripes, as well as benefit to his society overall. It has already been noted that Jefferson perceived the need for widespread education – both as a right that should be available to people in general, and also as a great benefit to the entire society, given that in his view an educated populace is necessary for a democratic society to be able to function. The United States had too few institutions for higher learning, in Jefferson's view, to meet the educational needs of the nation; moreover, he had serious misgivings regarding the quality of those that did exist. Jefferson envisioned, and founded, a university that in many ways was as much of a departure from the *status quo* at the time for colleges, as his political principles diverged from traditional monarchic political thinking – an institution

whose outlook was intentionally modern and progressive, far more inclusive and wide-reaching, and specifically secular, as opposed to the rather narrow, limited, and often theologically-oriented practices that were usual for colleges in the day. The degrees of inventiveness and excellence around which he organized the University were intended by Jefferson to be for the benefit and betterment both of the students who attended it, as well as the nation overall. Perceiving a relative insufficiency of quality higher education in the country and correctly anticipating the future need of it, Jefferson in his typical fashion took upon himself the great challenge of addressing that lack, and founded the university, which in many ways set new standards over time for how higher education would come to be conducted. He personally considered it one of the three finest achievements of his entire career.

Finally, he proclaimed [in his epitaph] himself father of a university allied with no religion or church, a home for the life of the mind that would foster an educated population, serve his beloved Virginia, and be a model to the world.⁶

The University of Virginia remains today one of the most respected centers of advanced learning in the nation, and stands as perhaps Jefferson's final great gift to his society.

⁶ Bernstein, *Thomas Jefferson*, x.

CHAPTER 9

OPPOSING HISTORICAL VIEWS ON JEFFERSON

A. Supporters' Perspectives

Jefferson's supporters and admirers largely see in him an astute and effective political leader, who held a visionary mindset as to what a society could, and in fact ought, to be. One who then set about – in collaboration with other, like-minded principal figures of the era of the American Revolution – doing what was necessary to bring that vision into tangible reality. His contributions and achievements in a wide array of varied fields, including education, science, law, and architecture, were notable, substantive, and so diverse that the appellation 'Renaissance man' has often been applied to him, and justifiably so. His political accomplishments, both during his times in and out of public office, stand among the foremost of any political leader in the annals of the United States, and moreover, in human history. His ranking, by historians, among the top five presidents in American history, is with good cause. Jefferson was by no means a perfect individual. His demeanor could be aloof, even prickly, without the easy, jovial geniality that made Benjamin Franklin, for instance, so invariably liked by nearly all who encountered him. In social settings beyond his immediate circle of close friends, Jefferson had a tendency to be uncomfortable and standoffish, and he was capable of alienating people, even those who had been close to him, particularly people whom he did not respect or with whom he disagreed. His relations with Alexander Hamilton ranged from antipathy to near-enmity, and he and John Adams – once close colleagues and friends – notably endured a decade-

long estrangement following the presidential election of 1800. Compelling, complex personalities are not always the easiest of companions.

Jefferson's actions leading up to the American Revolution, however, established him as one of the principal figures driving the entire process, quite rightfully making him a national hero alongside the likes of Franklin, Washington, Adams, Madison, *et al.* His many later accomplishments and contributions to the French movement while minister there, and to the further development of the United States as Congressman, Secretary of State, and President, further cemented his reputation. While much of the esteem accorded to him doubtlessly is the product of those of his achievements which were more tangible in nature, such as the Louisiana Purchase and the authorship of such landmark documents as the *Declaration of Independence* and the *Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom*, such achievements should perhaps rightfully be seen as somewhat secondary, as merely the manifestations of what made Jefferson a truly remarkable figure. For it is in the philosophy, the perspective, the collection of values that he held – the very characteristics that engendered those tangible actions – where we see perhaps Jefferson's most exemplary qualities: the remarkable humaneness in his abiding concern for the lot of the common man, the steadfast belief in the principle of equality as the foundation of societal structure, the determination to continue acting forcefully to bring about those fundamental changes in society that he believed were necessary.

B. Detractors' Perspectives

Not all, however, see Jefferson in such a positive light. Some scholarship – particularly in recent years as fuller understanding of the circumstances between

Jefferson and Sally Hemings has come to light – sees flaws in his character, opinions, and actions that are perceived as grave at the very least, perhaps even entirely defamatory. And it must be conceded that there were indeed flaws, at least when judged by the standards of contemporary society. Certain aspects of Jefferson’s views may be seen, from a modern perspective, as momentous and deeply troublesome omissions.

One obvious omission concerned gender. In line with the predominating views of his era, Jefferson’s political thinking did not extend to anything resembling what today would be called sympathy for feminism. Women’s status, station, and rights were not on par with those for men, either prior to or following the American Revolution, nor were they in other Western societies either. It would take another century-plus for American women to gain, in stages, the political rights possessed by men – the Nineteenth Amendment granting full suffrage was not passed and ratified until 1920. There are many who would argue, furthermore, that achieving full societal equality has still yet to be accomplished. For whatever progress and good the Founding Fathers may have accomplished, Jefferson included, they clearly had very far to go in matters of gender.

A second glaring omission, one for which Jefferson has been most stringently castigated of late, concerned race. In this area we encounter one of the most complicated, inconsistent, at times contradictory and confusing sides of his character and views. A slave owner, as had of course long been the near-ubiquitous practice for affluent white men throughout the Southern states (particularly those whose lands were extensive enough to place more or less within the plantation category, as his were), Jefferson had a perplexing, troubled, in some ways convoluted relationship with the practice of slavery,

and with matters concerning different races overall. His views were never fully articulated, at least within the extant written record, appear to have changed considerably more than once over time, and remain far from fully clear. On the one hand, Jefferson owned several hundred slaves over the course of his life. On the other, throughout his political career he opposed the international slave trade and worked to abolish it, culminating with the Act Prohibiting Importation of Slaves in 1807 during his second term as President. He worked on various forms of legislation, during his time in the Virginia legislature and later as Governor, aimed at easing the practice of manumission, and pushed hard for the anti-slavery provisions in the Northwest Ordinance of 1787. He is known to have purchased particular individual slaves on a number of occasions specifically to reunite families, to have been the polar opposite of the Simon Legree archetype in his treatment of slaves, and to have manumitted many of his own over the years. Yet he continued to own them nonetheless, and did not free them all during his lifetime, despite being reputed to have intended to do so. Furthermore, he did not perceive other races to be on par with whites, and did not believe that the United States ultimately could successfully exist as a mingled, multi-racial populace with all on societal parity. Jefferson apparently never did manage to come to any lasting, definitive take on racial issues, one with which he could remain in complete comfort:

Jefferson's view of slavery was deeply conflicted, but his view of enslaved people of African descent, or even of free African Americans, was not. As a believer in the natural rights of human beings as gifts of God to any individual who possessed the capacity to tell right from wrong, Jefferson regarded slavery with anguish and despair.¹

¹ Bernstein, *Thomas Jefferson*, xi.

There is not much about Jefferson’s views regarding matters of gender and race that was particularly uncommon for his time and place. His indifference to rights and status of women was far more the norm than the exception. His views concerning slavery were considerably more liberal and humane than those held by many, particularly throughout the South – though not all, as thought and movements for outright and uncompromising abolition predominated in various areas of the nation, clustering in the North. And even among abolitionists, not to mention most everyone else in the population, racist beliefs and conviction of (white) racial superiority were the norms of the era. What makes Jefferson a target for criticism and condemnation, regarding these matters, were those same aspects that constituted many of the very elements that were the greatest strengths of his views and words. The heart of some of his most forceful, compelling attestations is composed of qualities such as the universality and intrinsicness of equality and fundamental rights: not just some, but “all” are created equal; basic human rights are not bestowed or arbitrary or transitory, they are “self-evident” as well as “unalienable” in nature. To trumpet such principles, in such clear and adamant terms, while omitting women and enslaved peoples (together numerically constituting over 50 percent of the nation’s population) from inclusion in such considerations, easily leaves Jefferson open to accusations of serious hypocrisy, thereby rendering null and void his exalted status as one of humanity’s great champions of universal rights and equality for *all* peoples. The historian Conor Cruise O’Brien’s summation of Jefferson’s views on the matter is extremely critical, while also underscoring the complicated, unresolved and unsettled relations Jefferson had with the practice of slavery:

Jefferson's relation to slavery is a classical case of *Odi et amo*. He sincerely abhorred it, but he also cherished and championed it. His concept of liberty included not merely the liberty to own slaves, but also the liberty to extend slavery.²

O'Brien's interpretation essentially focuses on the troubling conflict between Jefferson's philosophical struggles with depriving anyone of liberty, and the long tradition of economic reliance on slave labor in his beloved homeland of Virginia, in which he himself obviously participated throughout his life. In his highly critical views, O'Brien leans heavily on Jefferson's difficulties with racial matters. The area remained one for which Jefferson never was able to find a conclusive solution, and his views and actions in this direction admittedly stand far from his most enlightened achievements.

C. Reconciling These Perspectives

Must one take one side or the other of these two opposing viewpoints? Was Jefferson either a paragon of humane principle, *or* a clever-tongued hypocrite concerned only with bettering the lot of white men such as himself? Or is it possible to reconcile the two perspectives somehow? Assuredly, the latter must be an option. It must be possible – and likely both preferable and worthwhile – to see in Jefferson and his views considerable degrees of truth in each of these opposing directions. Jefferson's shortcomings must in all fairness be acknowledged and granted. Even though they may have been largely the products of his time, thus typical of it and to be expected, his views regarding women and other races were far from enlightened, far from generous, far from fully just or justified. They are not outright excusable, they deserve their full share of

² O'Brien, *The Long Affair*, 277.

criticism, they do not represent or harmonize with the best and noblest of his thinking and actions, and they are not at all to his credit.

These drawbacks in his beliefs, however, significant as they may have been, do not eradicate or fatally compromise the genuine nobility and greatness of those things that did rightfully stand as the best of what he believed, wrote, and accomplished. The events, writings, and expressed beliefs of the American and French Revolutions accomplished immense strides forward in changing the terms, fundamental basis, process, and principles by which politics, lawmaking, and governance would be conducted in the Western world; Jefferson was one of the central, major driving forces of the former movement, and was a notable contributor, directly and indirectly, to the latter. The flaws and omissions in his views were unfortunate and unenlightened, to say the least, but the benefit that he brought to each effort specifically, to citizens in those lands and elsewhere both then and since, was enormous. Changing the terms and focus of Western politics and societal structuring, taking the stance that the lives of ordinary common people mattered and deserved consideration, expanding rights and political participation well beyond the bounds of only the relatively tiny upper echelon who previously had enjoyed such privileges – these steps changed the course of politics and society thereafter. Even if the initial beneficiaries of those actions were still far more limited than what genuinely was right, grievously overlooking many who deserved the same benefits, and self-contradicting the ‘universality’ that was claimed, the advances made by the leaders and framers of the two movements were monumental nonetheless. A break had to be made, away from socio-political dominance being purely the enclave of

the elite, in order for social progress to occur. The American and French movements constituted such a break, in resounding terms, which is what did indeed make both ‘revolutionary’ rather than merely revolts. The two revolutions, spurred onwards and largely shaped by their respective leaders and thinkers, established the principles and models on which Western societies would come to be restructured throughout the ensuing two centuries, and paved the way for the eventual further expansion of those same rights and benefits to groups – notably women and racial minorities – who were excluded from them initially. Unquestionably, the early limitations of those rights and equalities were indeed regrettable, and did belie the proclamations of universality on which they were largely based, yet those very claims were crucial to the later rightful extension of those rights to the peoples initially excluded, by inherently being attestations that essentially had to be fulfilled in their entirety. To stop short of doing so effectively makes such totalitarian pronouncements self-defeating. As flawed as the execution and realization of the principles declared by Jefferson and his revolutionary cohorts may initially have been, society today owes them a debt that verges on immeasurable nonetheless.

CHAPTER 10

CONCLUSION

Relatively few eras have ever been as dramatic, seminal, and significant to the course of human history as the age of the great revolutions in France and America. Western civilization (as well as some nations elsewhere in the world) owes much of its fundamental societal structure, governing organization, and guiding principles to the efforts of the leaders and thinkers of those movements. We now live in societies in which basic equality of persons is one of the foremost, dominant precepts: codified, defended, and even assumed. Sovereignty of the populace is a given, as well as our ability to participate in the political process, establish and change laws and regulations, and collectively determine our leadership and course. We enjoy rights such as freedom of speech, religion, movement, the press, and assemblage, life, liberty, and the possession of property, and government that is respectful and responsive to our needs and priorities. We are not legally tied to the land or the local lord, subject to the capricious whims of the aristocracy, or constrained to miserably impoverished existences devoid of education or any possibility of advancement, as European peasants had been for centuries. Variances and imperfections do still exist, of course, in many ways and places, but the essential perspective and purpose of governance, the fundamental structure of our societies, and the ways in which we may lead our lives, are comprehensively different from the ways in which all those aspects had once been, much to the benefit of the overwhelming majority of constituent populaces.

Although a wide variety of events, writings, and factors that have arisen over hundreds of years from many different directions, have played roles great and small in the process that has brought civilization to this point, the era of the French and American Revolutions in many ways may be seen as the real onset of that process. The principal figures of those two movements – among whom Thomas Jefferson stood as one of the most prominent and lastingly influential – bear an immense amount of the responsibility and credit for the course which was taken by those revolutions, as well as overall Western socio-political development thereafter.

A. Extent of Reciprocal Philosophical Influence

The American and French Revolutions did not unfold in isolation. They were the direct results of prevailing socio-political-economic circumstances at the time of their respective inception, which may have differed in detail, but were considerably more similar than different. Each was sparked by the intolerable, extended, and unjust hardship that had been endured by their populaces. They were in many ways simply the logical consequences of much the same body of thought of the Enlightenment era, as expounded by figures such as Locke, Rousseau, Paine, and Descartes. Those ideas perhaps merely needed opportunity to be put into action at some point in time; the two revolutions provided that opportunity.

The two movements and their leaders shared numerous points of similarity, influence, even outright collaboration at times. The principles that each presented, the restructuring their societies underwent, the major documents and laws they produced, all shared much in the way of perspective, essence, and even language. We can look back

and see American influence, particularly from Jefferson, on the principles and course of the French Revolution. The *Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen* – the major statement of values and principles of the entire French affair – in particular shows clear reflections of Jeffersonian thought. The French largely emulated, a decade later, much of what the Americans had done, and substantially along the politico-philosophic lines that Jefferson and his compatriots had laid out. We can also see, in return, echoes of the French *Déclaration* in the American Bill of Rights. The two revolutions were far from being wholly separate, distinct entities, but were similar outgrowths of Enlightenment political thought, with multiple aspects of close interconnectedness and influence.

B. Jefferson's Defensible Legacy

Jefferson was not only a remarkable, but a remarkably complex and at times inconsistent and changeable, individual. His views never reached a state of stasis, just as his knowledge and understanding of the world never reached a state that he would call completion. There was always more, in his view, to learn and to discover, and he engaged wholeheartedly and continually in those processes throughout the entirety of his life. As a consequence, his views, beliefs, and positions were subject to continual adjustment and evolution in tandem with his learning. His willingness to learn from whatever source – certainly including his time and experiences in France – that may offer something new and potentially valuable, was every bit as striking as his eternal drive to learning.

While the process of continual evolution in his perspectives and beliefs can produce puzzlement or frustration on the part of the political historian, it is also one of the qualities that most made him a compelling figure and a visionary political leader in

his own time. He was as willing to learn as to instruct, to share views as to hear those of others be shared, to influence as to receive influence, and to see something today from a perspective different from what he had seen yesterday, then adjust his views accordingly. His ideals, principles, and understanding of the world were consciously formed through a lifetime of experience and learning, within which the chance to observe the dramatic early stages of the French Revolution during his five years in Paris certainly counted as one of the more formidable episodes.

Jefferson may not have been the most prolific fount of original political theory, but he didn't need to be. The times in which he lived called for someone to fill a role for which he was exceptionally well suited: a remarkably astute synthesizer of political theories and an exceptional transformer of those principles into concrete and usable form through his superlatively eloquent writings. These were the aspects of his career that Jefferson himself regarded most highly, clear to see in the manner in which he looked back on it all late in life:

[Jefferson] omitted his political offices from his epitaph. The words he chose, however, are as notable for what they say as for what they leave out. Jefferson presented himself to posterity as a man concerned above all with ideas. Each of the three achievements listed on his tombstone speaks to that concern. He first claimed authorship of the American Revolution's fundamental political testament, the most eloquent statement of the new nation's core principles...He next declared himself author of his era's most revolutionary statute, which denied government the authority to dictate what human beings can and cannot believe...Finally, he proclaimed himself father of a university.¹

His writings did so much to provide the catalyst needed to transfer ideas into actions, resulting in the transformations of two societies and ultimately the course of human

¹ Bernstein, *Thomas Jefferson*, x.

affairs. His influence on the nature of the United States was unquestionably immense and remains recognized as such; his influence on the French was substantial as well. The official motto of “liberté, égalité, fraternité” that France still holds today, which is more than a mere slogan but rather encapsulates the guiding precepts of that society, owes a significant nod to the principles which Jefferson brought into popular consciousness.

Jefferson himself obtained, during his years as minister in France, the validation he'd sought: that the values and beliefs he held regarding societies and governments, on which the United States had been founded and structured, were indeed desired by peoples elsewhere as well. The cause of the American revolutionaries had been a just one; there was indeed universal worth in those beliefs. He made substantive contributions to the parallel cause of the French populace, using the experience to further extend and refine his own socio-political beliefs and his understanding of the world, and returned home to continue his magnificent life's work at the center of the process of shaping the United States into the society he believed it could and ought to be. Few have ever accomplished more.

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