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THOMAS JEFFERSON: A CIVILIZED MAN¹

By CHARLES A. BEARD

The occasion that draws us together; the heritage bequeathed to us by the powerful and many-sided personality whose life and services we commemorate; this fateful hour in the history of our Republic; this spot of earth; this University — all that it has been and will be in years to come; the very hills about us echoing with voices of great history; the world visible and the world invisible here and now conspire to make us pause and ponder well both thought and utterance. Who among us is keen enough and wise enough to say the right and just words appropriate to the two-hundredth anniversary of the birth of Thomas Jefferson? Certainly, not I. As I measure my powers for this task, amid the flood of memories that rolls over me, I am moved to think that the silence of meditation might be best. But the University of Virginia, founded by Mr. Jefferson, has called upon me to break the silence of meditation, and I am thus laid under an obligation that cannot be denied.

In the way of some justification for my temerity, I may say that I have read thousands of pages of Mr. Jefferson's writings, printed and manuscript; have scanned the huge collection of letters and memorials directed to him, now deposited in the Library of Congress; have, for long years, studied over and over his state papers; have scrutinized hundreds of books, addresses, articles, pamphlets, and essays bearing on his character, thought, work, and influence in the history of our country and the world. Yet, these very searches seem to prescribe suspense and caution on my part, lest the subject, embracing so many imponderables, be left without due intimation of its magnitude; nay, more, lest its spacious range be narrowed by some faulty phrase, some word lacking in accuracy and justice.

All assembled here know full well that Mr. Jefferson's mind

¹Address delivered by Charles A. Beard at the University of Virginia on the two-hundredth anniversary of the birth of Thomas Jefferson, April 13, 1943.

touched almost everything human: ancient languages and literatures; the arts and sciences; music; the advancement of knowledge; the religions and the ethical teachings of the centuries; the instruments and methods of agriculture and manufacture; the economies of individual and social living; the philosophies of politics and government; the practices of statecraft, diplomacy, and war; the history and institutions of the Old World; and the long future of our Republic, stretching even beyond the span of our years. Bearing witness to the amplitude of his intellectual range are his papers and letters, the surviving memoranda of his painstaking studies, and the splendid library he collected for his own instruction — incomparable among the private libraries of the United States in his time. Under what formula, then, may the multitudinous events, the intellectual strivings, and the moral interests of Mr. Jefferson's long life be ordered for comprehension?

Petty souls have torn phrases and passages from his writings, and from the sequences of his successive years, in efforts to make their petty causes seem the greater, to justify their pretensions, to kindle the fires of partisan and sectarian rage. But minds that strive to grasp the context and meaning of his whole career — its breadth, height, and depth — are aware of the violence that has been done and can be done by such political partisanship and intellectual dabbling. Who among Mr. Jefferson's contemporaries knew the evils of sectarianism more intimately than he? Did he not often, in solemn hours, warn us against the passions, hatreds, and innuendoes of party politics, of religious disputes, of personal and social bigotry and bitterness?

In a letter to Thomas Jefferson Randolph in 1808, Mr. Jefferson warned his grandson against two particular types of sturdy disputants. The first included young intellectuals cocksure of themselves though deficient in knowledge; and the second, ill-tempered men who have taken up a passion for politics. From both these classes of disputants, Mr. Jefferson advised the youth to "keep aloof, as you would from the infected subjects of yellow fever or pestilence. Consider yourself, when with them, as among the patients of Bedlam, needing medical more than moral counsel. . . . In the fevered state of our country, no good can ever

result from any attempt to set one of these fiery zealots to rights, either in fact or principle. . . . Get by them, therefore, as you would by an angry bull; it is not for a man of sense to dispute the road with such an animal.”

So instructed out of his wisdom, I shall not attempt to say with what particular parties, sects, or programs Mr. Jefferson would associate himself if he were living among us now and compelled to act in respect of them. To do this would be to take possession of him for our purposes instead of allowing the richness of his character, thought, and spirit to take possession of us. It would be paying tribute to our own predilections and not to his greatness. In seeking to grasp the fullness of our obligations today we are bound to pursue another course — to inquire what supreme and overarching view of the universe and humanity lifted him above common clay and gave inspiration as well as direction to his theory and practice in the service of our Republic.

After a long consideration of Mr. Jefferson's life and labor, I have concluded that the conception most fitting and most warranted by his recorded thought is the powerful modern idea of civilization.² Everything good and true, beautiful and useful, which he desired for our country, came within the compass of this modern world-view, this interpretation of history, made and to be made. He was among the first to use the word in America, to discover its moral and intellectual potentialities, to seize upon its offering of hope and guidance to tormented mankind struggling for liberty against ancient barbarisms, for the values and decencies of worthy living against fear, ignorance, and oppression. He early perceived the significance of this rising idea; he helped to give it content and force, to anchor it in the movement of great history from the beginnings in the dim past, onward into the living present, outward into the future ever becoming. In a closely knit letter, written during the evening of his life, he de-

² The word “civilization,” in its social sense, was a new one. It came into English usage about the middle of the eighteenth century. Adam Ferguson used it as early as 1767 in *An Essay on the History of Civil Society* (Edinburgh, 1767). Jefferson was acquainted with Ferguson's work. For origins and meanings of the term, see Charles and Mary Beard, *The American Spirit: A Study of the Idea of Civilization in the United States* (New York, 1942), especially Chapter III, “Origins of the Idea of Civilization.”

clared his belief in the fact and promise of civilization. Finally, it was under this idea that Thomas Jefferson and John Adams, long estranged, were at length reconciled in fundamental views a few years before they both sank into their last sleep, the son of Massachusetts murmuring amid the gathering shadows that the son of Virginia still lived.

To you who have come to honor Mr. Jefferson today, serving for the moment as a court of judicature, I present this question as central to the occasion: If we are to characterize him by the most commensurate term, must we not say that in thought and action he was a highly civilized man, working creatively for civilization — outstanding among the highly civilized personalities of his time and place, and of all times and places? Does any other term more precisely cover the dimensions, qualities, and dynamics of Mr. Jefferson's thought and action, theory and practice? As for myself, I make bold to assert before this tribunal that the world-view, civilization, is the just formula under which to appraise Mr. Jefferson's ideas, interests, and activities.

If some among you have doubts as to the justice of my characterization, I recommend to them a reading or re-reading of the more than ten thousand pages of Mr. Jefferson's writings and the commentaries of his friends who knew him intimately. Words fail me in my efforts to describe briefly the depth and variety of his concern, not merely with government and politics, but with every branch of knowledge, with the classic literature of the ages, with public and private virtues, with the education and shaping of human character, with the delights of the heart and mind, with the joys and sorrows that make up the round of living, with all the treasures of wisdom and understanding that lift men and women above the beasts of the fields, with the history and philosophy of mankind's vast experience. No one, I am convinced, can read these thousands of pages without confirming my verdict that the world-view known as civilization most closely corresponds to Mr. Jefferson's theory of great history and summation of values.

This is not to say that he measured up in all respects and always to the fullness and true grandeur of the new conception. Various phases of its meaning, then unfolding in the conscious-

ness of the American society, escaped his attention and emphasis. He did not, for example, accord to women the equality in the contemporary civilizing process that he ascribed to men; nor did he, in his luminous vision, make room for the role and the obligations that were to come to women in the civilization of the future.

Moreover, Mr. Jefferson was human, and to be human is to partake of mortal limitations, frailties, and distempers. Engaged in the practice of his theories, he often made compromises by bowing to realities that seemed invincible. Only the disembodied spirit can be strictly logical. In other words, he did not wholly escape from the bonds of our clay.

Let all this be known. Let criticisms of his character, deeds, and policies stand as declared and written in the literature of our history. Let no gloss be spread over the contradictions between his doctrines and the practice of slavery. Let sectarians, busy as bees with their little designs, snip quotations from his writings and claim for their special devices the power of his great name. Let us accept his stern command that the leaders of the revolutionary age are not to be regarded as demi-gods. Even so, I am convinced, it was for a cause no less ample than civilization in the United States, amid hopes and sympathies for mankind, that Thomas Jefferson strove with the powers of his mind and heart as a student, public servant, national leader, and private citizen, and, in so striving, achieved his immortality in history.

As I am given to see things, all other views and phrases attached to Mr. Jefferson's name or asserted as characterizations are too partial or too narrow. He has been called a democrat and the founder of American democracy. But in his writings that have come down to us, it is nowhere evident that he thought of his role in history or of his aspirations for America as fully encompassed by that term. Unless my searching eyes have failed me, in all the thousands of pages surviving from his pen, the word democracy or democratical does not appear more than ten or fifteen times; in no public utterance or state paper did Mr. Jefferson call himself a democrat or a Democrat with a capital D, or call America or his party a democracy. Unless my eyes have failed me, the word is not to be found in the Declaration of

Independence, nor in his inaugural addresses, nor in his presidential messages.

Once he wrote that "we of the United States . . . are constitutionally and conscientiously democrats," but that was in a private letter of 1816, after he had retired from public life. In the same year, also in a private letter, he referred to our experiment as "a government democratical but representative." By what, on another occasion, he called a "true democracy," he meant a small community, such as a ward or a town, governed directly by the voters.

To be sure, during his public life, the term "democrat" was often flung at Mr. Jefferson as a sign of contempt by Federalist critics. To be sure, the appellation was used, with growing frequency, by many of his followers. He did not spurn the idea of democracy. It was not in his temper to rage at new opinions. But he did not adopt it as his device or as the title of his country or his party.

The characterization which he deliberately chose for the United States and his party was Republican. And it is a tribute to his genius and influence that long afterward, when Democrats, Whigs, and independents formed a new party with which to achieve power in the Union, they seized upon the title which Mr. Jefferson had coined and called themselves Republicans. It is also significant in this respect that Abraham Lincoln, leader of the new party with an old name, publicly confessed his indebtedness to Thomas Jefferson for the first principles of popular government.

By content and range of human sympathies the idea of republic covered more of the values summed up in the world-view of civilization than did the idea of democracy. As generally understood in the eighteenth century, democracy pertained strictly to the machinery or form of government, rather than to the ends of government in society. It did not then have many of the social connotations later attached to it and was widely used to signify merely government by the people, by a majority of qualified voters. On the other hand, the word republic as then employed was broader. It embraced the moral objectives of government as declared in the idea of civilization — *res publica*, the public

welfare, the commonwealth, the ends of just government as proclaimed in the Declaration of Independence. As Thomas Paine wrote in his *Rights of Man*, the term republic involved “the purport, matter, or object for which government ought to be instituted . . . what ought to be the character and business of government.” Compressing his thought on the subject into a single sentence, Paine said: “Republican government is no other than government established for the interest of the public, as well individually as collectively.”

If in certain moments Mr. Jefferson spoke of government as though limited in objectives to the exercise of a narrow police power, on other occasions, equal in gravity or more weighty, he declared that government is charged with civilizing as well as repressive functions. He favored, for instance, the establishment of a National University and the promotion of agriculture, industry, transportation, the arts, and sciences by the Federal Government, through constitutional amendment if necessary. Government was for him not a mere physical necessity, not an end in itself; it was a part of the civilizing process and had a role to play in that process.

So we seem warranted by facts in concluding that republic — *res publica* — the public good, as incorporated in the idea of civilization, was for Mr. Jefferson a more fitting conception than democracy to be applied to American society and to the party which he led to victory. This interpretation has support also in the finding that the term “Democratic” was not adopted in any official manner by Mr. Jefferson’s party in his lifetime or given a complete monopoly as against his term “Republican” until the Democratic national convention of 1844.

Strongly attached, as Mr. Jefferson undoubtedly was, to the doctrines of popular government, nowhere in his writings now extant, if anywhere, did he ever espouse the numerical formula of democracy in its logical completeness. He refused to place all the values of civilization, including life, liberty, and the advancement of learning, at the mercy of majorities in legislatures or at the polls. He feared the tyranny of the many as well as the tyranny of the one and believed in the firm restraint of popular power by ethical and constitutional limitations. On his own ac-

count, apart from reading Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man*, Mr. Jefferson knew that it was not to government alone, even popular government, that Americans must look for the progress in civilization. He was well aware that they must also look to the creative spirit of individuals and groups, to society as a commonwealth, with a government, to be sure, yet with large spheres of cultural liberty forever protected against excesses of majorities.

Again, no faith was more firmly fixed in Mr. Jefferson's mind than the conviction that paper constitutions establishing mechanical rights of voting, whether called democratic or republican, would not guarantee the future of America unless underwritten by commodious living, by education, by independent and inquiring minds, and by the humane spirit — all necessary to civilization. Charged with being an incorrigible idealist, the author of glittering generalities, Mr. Jefferson, nevertheless, understood better than most of his contemporaries that popular government, if it is to endure, must have an economic underwriting. And the most certain underwriting for republican institutions, he early decided, was freehold agriculture. In well-known passages he expressed the view that those who own plots of earth, who look to the labor of their hands, the sun in heaven, and the soil at their feet for their sustenance, possess the substance and spirit of independence necessary for individual liberty and the virtuous conduct of representative government.

It was in this respect that, during his middle years, he came nearest in his thinking to the pessimism which denies civilization. For he thought that our Republic would endure only as long as there was vacant land to be redeemed and tilled. Beyond that he scarcely dared to lift the veil. When we get piled upon one another in cities, as in Europe, he once said, we shall go to eating one another as they do in Europe.

Taking truth as our guide, as he would desire us to do, it is just to add that his lifelong friend, James Madison, peering ahead into the year 1930 as a time-limit of prophecy, kept the issue open. Three or four years after Mr. Jefferson's death, this far-seeking statesman of the Old Dominion expressed the hope that equalizing legislation and the wisdom of the wisest states-

men might overcome the crisis of concentrated wealth and concentrated indigence which his former colleague of Monticello had anticipated and dreaded.

Warm as was Mr. Jefferson's attachment to freehold agriculture as a source of personal liberty and public virtue, he yielded to what seemed to be the requirements of national independence and accepted the drive of commercial and industrial ambition, despite the dangers of avarice and caprice associated with it. While he was minister of the United States to France, in 1785, a correspondent asked his opinion "on the expediency of encouraging our States to be commercial." His reply was revealing. "Were I to indulge my own theory," he said, "I should wish them to practice neither commerce nor navigation, but to stand, with respect to Europe, precisely on the footing of China. We should thus avoid wars, and all our citizens would be husbandmen. . . . But this is theory only, and a theory which the servants of America are not at liberty to follow. Our people have a decided taste for navigation and commerce . . . and their servants are in duty bound to calculate all their measures on this datum: we wish to do it by throwing open all the doors of commerce, and knocking off its shackles. But as this cannot be done for others, unless they will do it for us, and as there is no great probability that Europe will do this, I suppose we shall be obliged to adopt a system which may shackle them in our ports, as they do us in theirs."

Later in his life, Mr. Jefferson, with John C. Calhoun, also adopted the view that the development of manufacturing was necessary to the maintenance of our political independence. This meant the introduction of the workshops, the urban "mobs," and the chicanery of business and financial manipulations which he feared. Yet, confronting the dilemma, he cast the die for the promise of national independence.

Whatever weight should be assigned to economics in Mr. Jefferson's philosophy, it must be remembered that he merely enclosed it as one element in his theory of history with civilization as invincible process. It was no rude and unlettered body of peasants and artisans following primitive methods that he had in mind for America. It was, on the contrary, an educated and

upstanding people, equipped with the sciences of skillful production, and the arts of commodious living, that he deemed to be the true source of strength for the Republic. As to the lower schools of universal education for the children of the people he proposed that, apart from the practical arts and moral sciences, the instruction be "chiefly historical."

"History," he said, "by apprizing them of the past, will enable them to judge of the future; it will avail them of the experience of other times and other nations; it will qualify them as judges of the actions and designs of men; it will enable them to know ambition under every guise it may assume; and knowing it, to defeat its views. In every government on earth is some trace of human weakness, some germ of corruption and degeneracy, which the cunning will discover, and wickedness insensibly open, cultivate, and improve. Every government degenerates when trusted to the rulers of the people alone. The people themselves therefore are its only safe depositories." And for leadership of the nation in all departments Mr. Jefferson proposed to rely upon talents and character drawn from the people, granted opportunities and trained in the humanities and sciences of the universities.

Over and above, through, in, and under all of Mr. Jefferson's thought about American society was his faith in liberty of inquiry, thought, and expression as necessary to civilization and in the capacity of the people to use this liberty in achieving the good, the true, and the beautiful. Did he not, with all the ingenuity and powers of his intelligence, do implacable battle against the Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798 — dire forerunners of similar legislation in our own times? Did he not choose as the axiom of this University the ancient saying: "And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free"? Did he not stipulate for this University freedom of inquiry and exposition for teachers, Socratic rights of challenge for students, self-government for the faculty, and an honor system for all the members? Did he not under the spell of the highest solemnity possible to the human spirit declare: "I have sworn upon the altar of God, eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man"?

In the midst of a flaming world war involving the issue of liberty and authority, everywhere; in an age when governments, some more and some less, grow in power over the minds and labors of their people, everywhere; in a momentous hour when the precious liberties of speech, press, inquiry, and learning are challenged, everywhere; during a period in which our own legislatures, federal and local, are prone to suppress objectionable ideas as crimes against the State — we confront decisions scarcely less momentous than those of 1776, decisions bearing on the eternal conflict between freedom and despotic power. This anniversary is, therefore, no sunshine celebration. Darkness lowers on the horizon and alarm bells ring in the night.

Compelled now, unless we have lost our national genius, to choose some shield of defence for the values of our civilization against the despotisms of other continents and the perils of the oppressive tendencies of State in our own midst, what single command from Thomas Jefferson offers us the greatest promise? What others may say, is for them to decide. As for me, after communing patiently and persistently with his instructions and the history of our country, I cannot do otherwise than to restate the declaration which he made on the altar of God: eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the human mind, the inquiring and creative mind.

It was by upholding freedom of inquiry, freedom of expression, freedom of discussion, and freedom of decision by “the common reason of society,” Mr. Jefferson insisted, that the people of the United States could escape the recurring despotisms that had plagued the nations of the Old World from time immemorial. “If this avenue [of freedom] be shut to the call of sufferance,” he once declared, “it will make itself heard through that of force, and we shall go on, as other nations are doing, in the endless circle of oppression, rebellion, reformation; and oppression, rebellion, reformation again; and so on forever.”

If it be an error on my part now to emphasize this single line of his teaching, then as he would say let truth combat it. If, however, it be the truth now sorely needed, if the leadership of Thomas Jefferson be as great as the evidences of our history seem to reveal, then, as he lifted the sign of liberty for the hu-

man mind in dark days of arbitrary power and war, we shall do well to raise it again to the heavens in these days of peril. We shall do well to follow it, unafraid, with steadfast assurance that in so doing we shall justly celebrate his memory, make ourselves worthy of it, and strengthen our country for storms ahead — the Republic of the United States whose independence he proclaimed so eloquently throughout the earth and to the coming ages.