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THOMAS JEFFERSON AND THE NATIONAL PURPOSE

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THOMAS JEFFERSON is an old, old subject in this Society. Elected a member in 1780, later elevated to the presidency, Jefferson served the Society in its quest for "useful knowledge" during the greater part of his life. After he passed away, in 1826, he was eulogized with appropriate solemnity in the Society's Hall. The life of Jefferson, Nicholas Biddle declared, was an impassioned and perpetual devotion to the cause of freedom.¹ The American Republic was his monument. In 1943, on the occasion of the bicentennial of Jefferson's birth, Carl Becker addressed himself, and this Society, to a question which would have puzzled and then alarmed Biddle: "What is Still Living in the Political Philosophy of Thomas Jefferson?"² Jefferson's *ends* were happily very much alive, Becker said; but the *means* to which he committed his cause no longer served it. Now, eighteen years later, while Americans still proclaim the basic rightness of that cause, they question whether the revolutionary tradition flowing from Jefferson and the Declaration of Independence can be fruitfully applied to the global conflicts of power and opinion in this *new* age of revolution.

The question and the doubt help to explain the renewed inquiry on the National Purpose. In the recent symposium conducted by *Life* magazine,³ in the Reports of the Rockefeller Brothers Fund,⁴ in the Report of the President's Commission on National Goals⁵—in the public discourse

¹ Biddle, Nicholas, *Eulogium on Thomas Jefferson delivered before the American Philosophical Society on the eleventh day of April, 1827*, Philadelphia, 1827.

² Becker, Carl, What is still living in the political philosophy of Thomas Jefferson? *Amer. Hist. Rev.* 48: 691–706, 1943.

³ Jessup, John K., and others, *The national purpose*, New York, 1960.

⁴ See especially report vi of the Rockefeller Brothers Fund special studies project, *The power of the democratic idea*, Garden City, 1960.

⁵ *Goals for Americans comprising the report of the President's Commission on National Goals and chapters submitted for the consideration of the commission*, New York, 1960.

of the United States generally—there is an urgent summons to Americans to revitalize the traditional image of a revolutionary nation embracing in its vision the freedom of men everywhere. Somehow—from affluence or cowardice or infirmity—the nation seems to have lost, if not its sense of purpose, then the power to exercise it effectively in this dynamic age. The United States, we are often reminded, possesses from its founding the noblest, the most extravagant, the best articulated principles and objectives of any nation; and yet, it is in danger of losing the global struggle for men's minds to the enemies of freedom.

This generation of Americans is not the first to encounter the perplexities of the National Purpose. The encounter has occurred in some form in every generation, for in every generation the values Americans live by have been refuted by the realities of their changing social worlds. There are two simultaneous histories of the United States: one visible, the other invisible; one the realm of American power and enterprise, the other the realm of American dream and conviction; one addressed to *what is*, the other addressed to *what ought to be*. The moral authority of the United States has been conveyed through its subjective history: its ritualized texts and doctrines, its fabled heroes, virtuous symbols, and myths of destiny. In this history Thomas Jefferson has been the leading protagonist, "Jefferson's influence," as James Bryce observed decades ago, "has been on the spirit of the people and their attitude toward their institutions rather than on the formation of the institutions themselves."⁶ Making their ceremonial bows in the direction of Thomas Jefferson, the present-day expounders of National Purpose follow the example of earlier generations who searched in Jefferson to discover the meaning of America itself.

The search has been full of difficulties. Viewed in terms of the evolving Jefferson image, our

⁶ Quoted in Muzzey, David S., *Thomas Jefferson*, 70, New York, 1918.

history has been a succession of crises on the meaning and purpose of that *liberty* to which Jefferson dedicated the United States at the hour of birth. What Jefferson may have meant is a thorny question in itself. His early conservative critics, and his liberal idolaters of more recent times, said that Jefferson meant the power of the people to rule. A democrat by conviction, he wished no hindrance of the popular will, in which he had implicit faith. More persuasive, however, has been a somewhat different idea of Jefferson's intention. In the Jeffersonian line of political succession, democracy was less a form of government than a principle opposed to government, a code of restraints on sovereignty whether exercised by the few or the many. The key to Jefferson's political system was the doctrine of individual liberty, with its necessary corollaries of limited and decentralized government. He was the first to see that the strength, the progress, even the splendor, of the nation might come, not from the consolidation of loyalties, not from the vastness of governing power, but from the release of its myriad individual talents and energies. Thus the Jeffersonian polity, as it established its ascendancy, uprooted privilege, degraded government, ennobled the free individual, and diffused power throughout the society. In this achievement lay America's claim to greatness.

Yet it was an achievement that stripped the collective entity, the nation, of a destiny of its own. Jefferson believed in the purposes of individuals; fundamentally, the concept of National Purpose was alien to his thought. Lacking senses, intelligence and conscience, nations were incapable of high purposes. The ends of man in the pursuit of happiness were as infinitely varied as the shapes of men's minds; to force them into a common mold was unthinkable. With the primary business of life—the improvement of self and humanity—government had little to do. Jefferson's negative philosophy of government expressed his positive faith in a society of free individuals. Liberty was largely a matter of private, not of public, power. Under the Jeffersonian dispensation, the American government, though identified with liberty, labored under the suspicion, even the conviction, that a great, cohesive, and powerful nation could not long remain a free one.

On the whole, the Jeffersonian view suited the conditions and temperament of the American people during the greater part of the nineteenth century. The first deep crisis of the National

Purpose erupted in the Civil War. For the War developed, in part, out of the crucial dilemma of the Jeffersonian polity: the positive commitment to freedom but the denial of national authority and responsibility for its advancement. The institution of slavery, while not the cause of the dilemma, created the political climate that made it inescapable. When the two great sections of the United States took incompatible positions on the authority of the national government to deal with slavery, the Jeffersonian theory of American liberty was sundered and replaced by two sectional interpretations of it. In the North, the assertion that slavery was a national concern—because freedom was a national commitment—violently cut the knot between the libertarian and the anti-national elements of the Jeffersonian creed. In the Southern states, on the other hand, the doctrines of strict constitutional construction, of state rights, decentralization, and home rule—all associated with Jefferson and liberty—were pursued to the ultimate limit of secession from the Union. The triumph of Northern arms in the Civil War was a triumph both of nationalism and of democracy. It was not anticipated in Jefferson's philosophy, for he conceived of democracy in terms of individual rights and local liberties. The system omitted all deeper bonds of obligation and community; the nation, as indeed all government, rested on little more than the ongoing consent of its members. But the Civil War established a permanent base of national life cemented, moreover, in the very principles of liberty Jefferson had declared inalienable. Of this tremendous leap forward in National Purpose, Abraham Lincoln was the magnificent symbol. As so often been said, "he did the work of Alexander Hamilton on . . . the principles of Thomas Jefferson."⁷

The second crisis in the National Purpose, to which Jefferson bears a significant ideological relationship, developed in easy stages and then culminated in the great depression of the nineteen thirties. The old reliance on the spontaneous and competitive actions of free men created the conditions under which an exploitative industrial order arose and flourished. In an age when everything centralized itself, when oppression was the consequence of too much rather than of too little liberty, when the aggressions against the indi-

⁷ Griggs, Edward Howard, *American statesmen*, 346, New York, 1927.

vidual were economic rather than political—in such an age the Jeffersonian political lexicon of state rights, individualism, and least government seemed incapable of defining anew the historic “promise of American life.” How were the ills of the economic order to be remedied by resort to the individualistic tradition whence they came? Jefferson, Henry L. Stimson observed in 1911, “never dreamed that out of too much liberty from official control might develop an unofficial power capable not only of overwhelming the individual citizen but the state government along with him.”⁸ History had turned Jefferson’s political universe upside down, and every humanitarian and progressive impulse worked toward making the national authority the overlord of rights previously reserved to the states or held in private. Yet, in the final outcome, the nation successfully met the challenge of the industrial order within the tradition of Jeffersonian principle. The achievement—in some respects more impressive than Lincoln’s in forging the link between democracy and nationality—was the work of Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal. “If Jefferson could return to our councils,” Roosevelt said in 1932, “he would find that while economic changes of a century have changed the necessary methods of government action, the principles of that action are still wholly his own.”⁹ If in its action the New Deal reversed most of the political elements that for a century had passed as Jeffersonian, it nevertheless vindicated Jefferson’s inflexible conviction in the right and the ability of the people to govern themselves. Liberty became, in this new context, the positive power to use government intelligently in works for human welfare. A host of vital human interests—employment, security, housing, children—too important to be left to the ravages of individualism—were thus brought under national authority.

And so, national policy, power, and purpose have grown without disturbing the central axis of democratic faith. “The art of free society,” the late Alfred North Whitehead reminds us, “consists in maintenance of the symbolic code; and secondly in fearlessness of revision, to secure that the code serves those purposes which satisfy an enlightened reason.”¹⁰ How successfully Ameri-

⁸ Quoted in Stimson, Henry L., and McGeorge Bundy, *On active service in peace and war*, 60, New York, 1948.

⁹ Roosevelt, Franklin D., *Looking forward*, 14, New York, 1933.

¹⁰ Whitehead, Alfred North, *Symbolism, its meaning and effect*, 91, Cambridge, 1928.

cans have combined reverence of their symbols with fearlessness of revision is demonstrated in the history of freedom’s protean symbol, Thomas Jefferson, enshrined in a heroic pantheon on the shore of the Tidal Basin in Washington by the very men who fearlessly revised his political philosophy.

But we are now caught up in still another ordeal of freedom, and the entire world is the battleground. Out of the rich stock of the native tradition, can we create a world compatible with American convictions? Can we, as a practical matter, secure the interests of the United States while at the same time advancing our moral purposes? Can the traditional power of the Jefferson symbol be renewed in the global environment of freedom in our time? Or must we conclude with the gloomy prophets of earlier generations that Jefferson’s faith—and America’s—has lost contact with the vital realities upon which it is supposed to act?

Most of the present-day expounders of the National Purpose are distressed by America’s failure to carry its own heroic image of freedom to the peoples of the world. They agree with Adlai Stevenson on the nation’s sacred mission “to show the world that the American revolution still belongs to all mankind”;¹¹ with Archibald Macleish that “the dream which has set the jungle and the cane on fire . . . is Thomas Jefferson’s dream—the dream which he and his contemporaries believed would change the world”;¹² with the President’s Commission that the nation must rededicate itself to Jefferson’s mighty vision of “a world in which every human being shall be free to develop his capacities to the fullest.”¹³ Every American must feel inspired by these utterances and must feel once again the continuing force of ancient doctrine in the American mind. But, lest we stumble at the brink of dangerous illusions, we had better take account of the obstacles which our tradition raises to the vigorous renewal of the National Purpose.

The American experience is, first of all, essentially a parochial one. Historically separated, physically and emotionally, from other nations, Americans have seldom had to project their purposes beyond the water’s edge. America has been

¹¹ Stevenson, Adlai, *The national leadership*, *Virginia Quart. Rev.* 36: 349, 1960.

¹² In Jessup, John K., *The national purpose*, 41, New York, 1960.

¹³ *Goals for Americans*, 1, New York, 1960.

more a refuge than a spearhead of freedom. The American political system, despite the rhetoric of revolution that accompanied its founding and still lifts men's hearts the world over, turned out to be one of the least transferable and least exportable ever invented. Jefferson made this discovery in his own lifetime. Disappointed in his foreign adventures, Jefferson contracted the universal clauses of his political creed, fixed his sights on America, and became, in Professor Gilbert Chinard's words, "the first Apostle of Americanism."¹⁴ The democratic goals that were unattainable elsewhere were interlaced with the realities of American life. Whether or not the awakening peoples of the world today are capable of adapting historic American goals to their tasks, we cannot forget, except at our peril, the enormous distance of time, of spirit, of circumstance that inhibit our identification with them and their identification with us. The fact is that to many peoples America is not the struggling, young revolutionary nation of the twentieth century, but rather a nation old in its faith, awesome in its power, and essentially conservative in its world view. American National Purpose must now necessarily be a mission to the world; unfortunately, however, the symbols which ought to be the vehicles of that mission are too peculiarly American and too firmly embedded in the moralities of the eighteenth century to declare the convictions of this cyclonic age.

A second obstacle is presented by the large residue of individualism in the American ethos. The successful pursuit of National Purpose calls for rechanneling American energies from a multitude of private ends to singular and commanding public ends. It calls for sacrifice. It calls for a virtual revolution in our conception of America: from a nation in which the individual fulfills *himself* to a nation which must fulfill *itself* in the conflicts of power and ideology among nations. The idea that the nation has a collective destiny, checking, diverting, transcending the destiny of its members, does not come easily to the American people. Historically they have been privileged to identify the freedom and prosperity of the individual with the ends of the state, which ends, therefore, required little constructive development of their own. So far as the tradition of individual-

ism has been revised, it has occurred in the stark face of disaster—the Civil War, the great depression—and in the framework of domestic policy. The problem is infinitely more difficult when the crisis to which the National Purpose is addressed lies outside our borders and manifests itself in ways little understood by the American people. Just as the image American society presents to the world is of limited world significance, so the image America, in turn, holds of the world is typically opaque.

Historical considerations such as these offer grounds neither for optimism nor for pessimism, but they invite sober reflections. The world that has rushed so suddenly upon American consciousness is *not* a stage for the enactment of American ideals. The concepts of National Interest and National Purpose are *not* identical, and the former makes demands which take precedence over the latter, as survival usually takes precedence over ethics. The renewed National Purpose *cannot* be fashioned on old doctrines and symbols of the native political tradition, for they do not speak to the radically altered American position in a world never dreamed of in Jefferson's philosophy.

And yet Jeffersonian symbol and value may play an important part in the renewal we seek. It is a peculiarly conservative part, and it has two aspects. First, to preserve in full vigor the institutions of freedom and self-government in this country as the only legitimate basis of American moral pretensions in the world community. Unless the nation is true to itself at home, it cannot be taken seriously when it carries its moral baggage abroad. In this sense, we declare again Jefferson's hope that the American experiment might be a living testament to the cause of freedom the world over. Second, to guide American global policy—not toward the messianic fulfillment of ideals, which would be disastrous—but toward realistic objectives of National Interest that are submitted to the chastening discipline of moral principle as enforced by a wise National Purpose. No more than in Jefferson's day can America enforce its *purposes* on the world stage. And surely, far less than in Jefferson's day, can human ideals control the forces of power. But America can at least validate its *power* morally by continued accountability in its use to the principles declared at the nation's birth.

¹⁴ Chinard, Gilbert, *Thomas Jefferson, the apostle of Americanism*, Boston, 1929.