

4. Jefferson Is Unenthusiastic (1787)

Thomas Jefferson, the American minister in Paris, learned of the Philadelphia convention with some misgivings. While recognizing the need for a stronger central government, especially in foreign affairs, he regarded the Confederation as a "wonderfully perfect instrument," considering the times. A comparison of the United States government with the governments of continental Europe, he declared, "is like a comparison of heaven and hell. England, like the earth, may be allowed to take the intermediate station." He evidently believed that some judicious patchwork would provide the needed bolstering. Upon receiving a copy of the new Constitution, he was troubled by some of its features, particularly by the absence of a Bill of Rights. Why, in the following letter to the prominent New York jurist William Smith, did he belittle reports of anarchy? Why did he condone periodic rebellions?

I do not know whether it is to yourself or Mr. [John] Adams I am to give my thanks for the copy of the new Constitution. . . . There are very good articles in it; and very bad. I do not know which preponderate. What we have lately read in the history of Holland . . . would have sufficed to set me against a chief magistrate eligible for a long duration, if I had ever been disposed towards one. And what we have always read of the elections of Polish kings should have forever excluded the idea of one continuable for life.

Wonderful is the effect of impudent and persevering lying. The British ministry have so long hired their gazetteers to repeat, and model into every form, lies about our being in anarchy, that the world has at length believed them, the English nation has believed them, the ministers themselves have come to believe them, and what is more wonderful, we have believed them ourselves.

Yet where does this anarchy exist? Where did it ever exist, except in the single instance of [Shays's Rebellion in] Massachusetts? And can history produce an instance of rebellion so honorably conducted? I say nothing of its motives. They were founded in ignorance, not wickedness.

God forbid we should ever be twenty years without such a rebellion. The people cannot be all, and always, well informed. The part which is wrong will be discontented, in proportion to the importance of the facts they misconceive. If they remain quiet under such misconceptions, it is a lethargy, the forerunner of death to the public liberty.

We have had thirteen states independent for eleven years. There has been one rebellion. That comes to one rebellion in a century and a half for each state. What country before ever existed a century and a half without a rebellion? And what country can preserve its liberties if its rulers are not warned from time to time that their people preserve the spirit of resistance? Let them take arms. The remedy is to set them right as to facts, pardon, and pacify them.

What signify a few lives lost in a century or two? The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants. It is its natural manure. Our convention has been too much impressed by the insurrection of

⁴P. L. Ford, ed., *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1894), vol. 4, pp. 466–467 (November 13, 1787).

Massachusetts; and on the spur of the moment they are setting up a kite [hawk] to keep the henyard in order.

I hope in God this article [perpetual reeligibility of the president] will be rectified before the Constitution is accepted.