Thomas Jefferson, Rebel!

It was some years after I had burned my fingers with a Roman candle before I learned why Americans made particular fools of themselves on the Fourth of July. It was not until I looked into the life and letters of Thomas Jefferson that the full import of his Declaration of Independence dawned on me. Which is as it should be. Great thoughts are not isolated accidents, but, rather, the product of reflection and personality, and to be fully appreciated they must be considered within this context. The historic document left us by Jefferson is best understood when it is measured against his philosophy of government, as revealed in his many letters; nor should we overlook the environment which bore down on that philosophy.

When we consider the Declaration in this light we see that it is not at all the charter of a new nation. It is a rationalization of rebellion. The indictment of the British crown was but a springboard from which Jefferson launched a political principle: that government, far from being an end in itself, is but an instrument invented by man to aid him in bettering his circumstances, and when that instrument fails to function properly it

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is high time to kick it out. And, which is most important, he meant *any* government, not only the particular one which at that time engaged his attention. If you have any doubt of it, reread the opening sentence of the Declaration; it will pull you up, this Fourth of July, when every politician in the world is fixing so to integrate political authority with our way of living that there will be no way of prying it loose. The current "course of human events" is far more ominous, as regards freedom, than that which justified Jefferson in calling for a change, even at the cost of a revolution; if his theory of government is still valid, as we seem to imply by our annual obeisance to it, every American should be eyeing the place where the musket ought to be.

That this doctrine of resistance to government was not a chance idea, but inherent in his political philosophy, is attested by the reiteration of it in a number of Jefferson's private letters and public statements. To Mrs. John Adams he wrote in 1786, "The spirit of resistance to government is so valuable on certain occasions that I wish it to be always kept alive." Aristocratic Yale College, which had conferred an honorary degree on him, got for its pains this piece of wisdom: "If the happiness of the mass of people can be secured at the expense of a little tempest now and then, or even of a little blood, it will be a precious purchase." He was in Paris when Shays' Rebellion against the burdens of debt and taxation (yes, taxation) took place; and even though the thunder of a big-league revolution was breaking about him, his comment on the outbreak at home was true to form: "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 facts they misconceive. If they remain quiet

under such misconceptions, it is a lethargy, the forerunner of death to the public liberty."

Very few of the signers of the Declaration were at one with Jefferson in his philosophy of government; most of them were for kicking out the arrogant personnel imposed by George III, but had no intention of abolishing the British system of government by and for the "rich and well-born"; while a few had no nobler purpose than to grind their own axes. But Jefferson lived at a time when the doctrine of natural rights was on the upswing. For a political thinker to reject or even question this starting point of social institutions was to invite doubt as to his intellectual soundness, just as any one who today points to the state as a disease of society is regarded as something of a freak. Morover, the abundance of free land in this new world gave natural rights a solid meaning; one could escape intolerable conditions within the colony by merely moving out beyond the limits of its exercisable power, and one could always find subsistence. Under such conditions faith of the individual in himself flourished easily, and it was not difficult to root that faith in "naturalness." The climate was good for the Jeffersonian philosophy of government.

Times have changed. There is no free land to which one can apply oneself when factory wages fall below the level of mere subsistence; there is no frontier escape from the long arm of the law. Thus economically frustrated and politically hemmed in, the individual tends to lose faith in himself and is not above selling his soul for a mess of pottage. He who is hungry for food has no stomach for natural rights. At this point political science conveniently changes its postulates. Now that the poverty-ridden public is more concerned with "security" than with

natural rights, philandering philosophers are quick to cast doubt on the virtue of the Jeffersonian charmer; and as their forebears fell to praising "divine right of kings" when that courtesan was riding high, wide, and handsome, so our current stock of "best brains" is all for the seductive charm and voluptuous promise of state regulation, and to hell with principle!

Somehow, notwithstanding, the lure of natural rights is persistent; she has her admirers always, and their ardor is of the kind that brooks no obstacles, even to the point of martyrdom. Were it not for the ebullience of these swains, serenading most vigorously when human dignity hits bottom, there would be no revolutions and the history of man would indeed be a drab story of hopeless decadence. But, though at times she seems forsaken—as at present—the lovers of liberty will always put in an appearance.

During the war of 1917–18 there were a number who for their espousal of the Jeffersonian ideal were put in jail. Memory brings up the glamorous name of Eugene V. Debs, but there were thousands of unknowns who for insisting on the right not to kill or be killed were unceremoniously flogged and incarcerated, while the number of World War I anarchists who boldly declared what the war was all about and were therefore locked up, peremptorily and illegally, will never be known. While many of them, as Jefferson foretold, suffered from "misconceptions," nevertheless they did not "remain quiet," and thereby they kept alive the "spirit of public liberty."

In like manner, the conscientious objectors of the second war are rendering an inestimable public service. In an age in which the doctrine of natural rights has all but gone under, these boys have questioned, refused, objected, and in so doing have just about kept her head above water. The majority of them, unfortunately, are without a basic philosophy; they just "hate war."

Cunningly, the state has indulged their pet passion by simply removing them from society, but has scrupulously avoided acts which might be interpreted as punishment for holding to principle; so that, having avoided the horror and danger of war, these boys have gradually sunk into personal adjustment with the state. Their quarrel with the state is no longer on a point of principle, but over the minor discomforts of camp life, loss of wages, financial suffering of their relatives. A comparative few—like those who walked out of the camps and into prisons, and those so-called incorrigibles consigned to the late "Alcatraz" at Germfask, Michigan—resisted the "passive resistance" by which the state sought to subdue their ardor, and by so doing gave notice to the world that natural rights is not without admirers. But, alas! they are few; among them is no name of such prominence as to force the subservient public press to call attention to the principle they stand for; and, except for the glorious self-respect which they maintained by it, their fight for the Jeffersonian doctrine is without visible victory.

The war is drawing to a close. Soon the lickspittles who switched philosophies on December 7, 1941, will be perjuring themselves anew; on a mountain of Bibles they will swear fealty to peace. Then there will be a flood of "disillusionment" literature, beside which that which came after 1918 will be a puny trickle. The selfsame professionals who for the past three years have been preaching the sermon of destruction and murder and hate will now shamelessly tell us how the war was mismanaged (as if sound management is ever applicable to a crazy enterprise); how the period of slaughter was improved upon by fortune hunters (as if that opportunity did not always influence the rationalization of war); how moral values went down in the holocaust (as if moral values ever have a place in

any adventure of the amoral state); how liberty was seduced by our politicians while we were fighting its battle in Asia and Europe (as if this were an unfortunate accident and not a necessary consequence); and so on.

But all these protestations and fulminations will be sound and fury, signifying nothing. It will be pleasant and popular, and perhaps profitable, to attack where there is no resistance; a peacetime pacifist, an exposer of past iniquities, or a defamer of dead politicians courts neither a prison sentence nor social ostracism. He effects no opposition. Let him rant. He is not a rebel in the Jeffersonian sense, but must be put down as a quixotic attacker of nothing in particular; for he advocates no principle dangerous to the status quo.

The "spirit of resistance to government" which in the Jeffersonian political philosophy is the taproot of liberty finds its justification in an unprovable axiom: the inalienable rights of the individual. These inhere in every man by the fact of existence; any infraction of them by a single citizen or a group of citizens, organized or unorganized, is immoral. It is to prevent such immoral behavior, or at least to discourage it, that governments are instituted among men. That is the ethical basis for political authority. In the final analysis it amounts to nothing more than a covenant between citizen and policeman, whereby the latter is hired for the sole purpose of protecting the former's life and property; or, as political science puts it, to maintain a social climate in which the individual may carry on his business of pursuing happiness. Nothing more. When the individuals who constitute government utilize the power vested in it for those purposes, even those which in their opinion make for "the greatest good for the greatest number," they have broken the covenant and should be sheared of their power. That is the

principle, the moral tenet, upon which Jefferson justified "the spirit of resistance to government."

Jefferson did not pursue the thought; but in postulating the principle he started the train of investigation which later came up with a clear distinction between government and state. The one is a social instrument, the other an unsocial perversion of it; the one is healthy, the other pathological. It is when those in power engage in projects which jeopardize the life or property of the individual, or utilize that power so that either they or a favored group benefits at the expense of the producing public, that government is transformed into state. Perhaps Jefferson vaguely sensed this distinction when he commented, in a letter to Madison, on the highly organized and orderly society among Indians, getting along on customs and public opinion, and seemingly without any of the coercive powers associated with government. He wondered whether this condition might not be the best; but he dismissed that thought as "inconsistent with any great degree of population."

Jefferson was short on economics; the absence of chaos which he found among the free Indians traced not to their lack of government but to the fact that whatever political authority existed was devoid of the power of taxation. It is in fact this power which transforms the social government into the antisocial state, and must in the end bring about a softening of the moral fiber of a people. The process of deterioration is quite simple. As more of the individual's production is absorbed by the state, the less he has for his own enjoyment, and the greater effort he must put out to maintain himself or to better his circumstances. A man's worth to himself is in indirect ratio to the toil entailed in his pursuit of happiness; the dignity of the individual disintegrates under the hammering of want and the

fear of it. On the other hand, the power of the state waxes in proportion to the wealth it absorbs through taxation. And as economic power is thus transferred from the individual to the state, the individual is pressed into bargaining for some of what was properly his by right of production; in the bargaining process he offers up his inalienable rights for a handout. The handout might be unemployment insurance or a place on the public payroll or a subsidy, but in any case the nonproductive state gathers economic strength and political power, while the productive individual becomes a supplicant. We have seen the ultimate of this moral disintegration in Germany, Russia, Italy, Japan, where the power to tax made a shambles of all property rights, and for further evidence we might look into the history of lost civilizations. The power to tax is the power to destroy human dignity.

Never before in the history of the country was Jefferson's admonition more pertinent than now. Never before has the state battened on so large a proportion of the wealth produced by its subjects. What is even more ominous is the growing public acceptance of the doctrine that state taxation may be made an instrument for social good; for which we can thank that brood of anti–natural rights theorists hatched out of the Marxist cesspool. So thorough has been the work of these missionaries of state paganism that they have got people to put a moral purpose on being robbed. It is this mental adjustment to the confiscatory inclination of the state, this rationalization of an immoral use of power, that bodes no good; for it is evidence of "a lethargy, the forerunner of death to liberty."