Letter to Roger C. Weightman

***Thomas Jefferson***

**June 24, 1826**

*Monticello*

RESPECTED SIR, — The kind invitation I receive from you, on the part of the citizens of the city of Washington, to be present with them at their celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of American Independence, as one of the surviving signers of an instrument pregnant with our own, and the fate of the world, is most flattering to myself, and heightened by the honorable accompaniment proposed for the comfort of such a journey. It adds sensibly to the sufferings of sickness, to be deprived by it of a personal participation in the rejoicings of that day. . .

May it be to the world, what I believe it will be, (to some parts sooner, to others later, but finally to all), the signal of arousing men to burst the chains under which monkish ignorance and superstition had persuaded them to bind themselves, and to assume the blessings and security of self-government. That form which we have substituted, restores the free right to the unbounded exercise of reason and freedom of opinion. All eyes are opened, or opening, to the rights of man. The general spread of the light of science has already laid open to every view the palpable truth, that the mass of mankind has not been born with saddles on their backs, nor a favored few booted and spurred, ready to ride them legitimately, by the grace of God. These are grounds of hope for others. For ourselves, let the annual return of this day forever refresh our recollections of these rights, and an undiminished devotion to them. …

Source: *Thomas Jefferson: Writings,*ed. Merrill D. Peterson (New York: Library of America, 1984), 1516-1517.

**Guiding Question:** Really? Fifity years after the Declaration of Independence and on his death bed, these are the only rights Jefferson names? Why are American freedoms, like these, called “negative freedoms”? How was Jefferson a man of his time? How was he a visionary even in this limited list of rights?

**A Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom, 18 June 1779, Jefferson**

*Well aware that the opinions and belief of men depend not on their own will, but follow involuntarily the evidence proposed to their minds; that*[1](http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-02-02-0132-0004-0082#TSJN-01-02-0224-fn-0001) Almighty God hath created the mind free, *and manifested his supreme will that free it shall remain by making it altogether insusceptible of restraint*;[2](http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-02-02-0132-0004-0082#TSJN-01-02-0224-fn-0002) that all attempts to influence it by temporal punishments, or burthens, or by civil incapacitations, tend only to beget habits of hypocrisy and meanness, and are a departure from the plan of the holy author of our religion,[3](http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-02-02-0132-0004-0082#TSJN-01-02-0224-fn-0003) who being lord both of body and mind, yet chose not to propagate it by coercions on either, as was in his Almighty power to do, *but to extend it by its influence on reason alone;*[4](http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-02-02-0132-0004-0082#TSJN-01-02-0224-fn-0004) that the impious presumption of legislators and rulers, civil as well as ecclesiastical, who, being themselves but fallible and uninspired men, have assumed dominion over the faith of others, setting up their own opinions and modes of thinking as the only true and infallible, and as such endeavoring to impose them on others, hath established and maintained false religions over the greatest part of the world and through all time: That to compel a man to furnish contributions of money for the propagation of opinions which he disbelieves *and abhors*,[4](http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-02-02-0132-0004-0082#TSJN-01-02-0224-fn-0004) is sinful and tyrannical; that even the forcing him to support this or that teacher of his own religious persuasion, is depriving him of the comfortable liberty of giving his contributions to the particular pastor whose morals he would make his pattern, and whose powers he feels most persuasive to righteousness; and is withdrawing from the ministry those temporary[5](http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-02-02-0132-0004-0082#TSJN-01-02-0224-fn-0005) rewards, which proceeding from an approbation of their personal conduct, are an additional incitement to earnest and unremitting labours for the instruction of mankind; that our civil rights have no dependance on our religious opinions, any more than[6](http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-02-02-0132-0004-0082#TSJN-01-02-0224-fn-0006) our opinions in physics or geometry; that therefore the proscribing any citizen as unworthy the public confidence by laying upon him an incapacity of being called to offices of trust and emolument, unless he profess or renounce this or that religious opinion, is depriving him injuriously of those privileges and advantages to which, in common with his fellow citizens, he has a natural right; that it tends also[7](http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-02-02-0132-0004-0082#TSJN-01-02-0224-fn-0007) to corrupt the principles of that *very*[8](http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-02-02-0132-0004-0082#TSJN-01-02-0224-fn-0008) religion it is meant to encourage, by bribing, with a monopoly of worldly honours and emoluments, those who will externally profess and conform to it; that though indeed these are criminal who do not withstand such temptation, yet neither are those innocent who lay the bait in their way; *that the opinions of men are not the object of civil government, nor under its jurisdiction*;[9](http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-02-02-0132-0004-0082#TSJN-01-02-0224-fn-0009) that to suffer the civil magistrate to intrude his powers into the field of opinion and to restrain the profession or propagation of principles on supposition of their ill tendency is a dangerous falacy, which at once destroys all religious liberty, because he being of course judge of that tendency will make his opinions the rule of judgment, and approve or condemn the sentiments of others only as they shall square with or differ from his own; that it is time enough for the rightful purposes of civil government for its officers to interfere when principles break out into overt acts against peace and good order; and finally, that truth is great and will prevail if left to herself; that she is the proper and sufficient antagonist to error, and has nothing to fear from the conflict unless by human interposition disarmed of her natural weapons, free argument and debate; errors ceasing to be dangerous when it is permitted freely to contradict them.

*We the General Assembly of Virginia do enact*[10](http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-02-02-0132-0004-0082#TSJN-01-02-0224-fn-0010) that no man shall be compelled to frequent or support any religious worship, place, or ministry whatsoever, nor shall be enforced, restrained, molested, or burthened in his body or goods, nor shall otherwise suffer, on account of his religious opinions or belief; but that all men shall be free to profess, and by argument to maintain, their opinions in matters of religion, and that the same shall in no wise diminish, enlarge, or affect their civil capacities.

And though we well know that this Assembly, elected by the people for the ordinary purposes of legislation only, have no power to restrain the acts of succeeding Assemblies, constituted with powers equal to our own, and that therefore to declare this act[11](http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-02-02-0132-0004-0082#TSJN-01-02-0224-fn-0011) irrevocable would be of no effect in law; yet we are free to declare, and do declare, that the rights hereby asserted are of the natural rights of mankind, and that if any act shall be hereafter passed to repeal the present or to narrow its operation, such act will be an infringement of natural right.

**Guiding Question:** This is a tough document but a vital one. Jefferson famously argues for complete religious liberty and separation of religion and all civil government (which inspired the First Amendment), but how is he promoting religion via this move?

**The Kentucky Resolution, Jefferson**

RESOLVED, That this commonwealth considers the federal union, upon the terms and for the purposes specified in the late compact, as conducive to the liberty and happiness of the several states: That it does now unequivocally declare its attachment to the Union, and to that compact, agreeable to its obvious and real intention, and will be among the last to seek its dissolution: That if those who administer the general government be permitted to transgress the limits fixed by that compact, by a total disregard to the special delegations of power therein contained, annihilation of the state governments, and the erection upon their ruins, of a general consolidated government, will be the inevitable consequence: That the principle and construction contended for by sundry of the state legislatures, that the general government is the exclusive judge of the extent of the powers delegated to it, stop nothing short of despotism; since the discretion of those who adminster the government, and not the constitution, would be the measure of their powers: That the several states who formed that instrument, being sovereign and independent, have the unquestionable right to judge of its infraction; and that a nullification, by those sovereignties, of all unauthorized acts done under colour of that instrument, is the rightful remedy: That this commonwealth does upon the most deliberate reconsideration declare, that the said alien and sedition laws, are in their opinion, palpable violations of the said constitution; and however cheerfully it may be disposed to surrender its opinion to a majority of its sister states in matters of ordinary or doubtful policy; yet, in momentous regulations like the present, which so vitally wound the best rights of the citizen, it would consider a silent acquiesecence as highly criminal: That although this commonwealth as a party to the federal compact; will bow to the laws of the Union, yet it does at the same time declare, that it will not now, nor ever hereafter, cease to oppose in a constitutional manner, every attempt from what quarter soever offered, to violate that compact:

AND FINALLY, in order that no pretexts or arguments may be drawn from a supposed acquiescence on the part of this commonwealth in the constitutionality of those laws, and be thereby used as precedents for similar future violations of federal compact; this commonwealth does now enter against them, its SOLEMN PROTEST.

Approved December 3rd, 1799.

**Guiding Question:** Is Jefferson advocating State’s Rights? Is he advocating rebellion?

**Excerpts from Alexander Hamilton on Government:**

All communities divide themselves into the few and the many. The first are rich and well born; the other, the mass of the people. The voice of the people has been said to be the voice of God; and however generally this maxim has been quoted and believed, it is not true in fact. The people are turbulent and changing; they seldom judge or determine right. Give therefore to the first class a distinct, permanent share in the government. They will check the unsteadiness of the second; and as they cannot receive any advantage by change, they will therefore maintain good government.

Can a democratic assembly who annually [through annual elections] revolve in the mass of the people, be supposed steadily to pursue the public good?  Nothing but a permanent body can check the imprudence of democracy. Their turbulent and changing disposition requires checks. (1787)

Take mankind in general, they are vicious--their passions may be operated upon... Take mankind as they are, and what are they governed by? There may be in every government a few choice spirits, who may act from more worthy motives. One great error is that we suppose mankind more honest than they are. Our prevailing passions are ambition and interest; and it will be the duty of a wise government to avail itself of those passions, in order to make them subservient to the public good. (1787)

I have an indifferent [low] opinion of the honesty of this country, and ill foreboding as to its future sys For in politics, as in religion, it is equally absurd to aim at making proselytes by fire and sword. Heresies in either can rarely be cured by persecution. (1787)

There is no reason to keep state governments the way we have them today. They are not necessary for any great purpose - neither for agriculture, commerce, revenue, or defense...We can all but abolish them and have one government for all the people of the country. (1792)

I said that I was affectionately attached to the republican theory... I add that I have strong hopes for the success of that theory; but in candor. I ought also to add that I am far from being without doubts. I consider its success as yet a problem. (1792)   
    
 The sacred rights of mankind are not to be rummaged for among old parchments or musty records. They are written, as with a sunbeam, in the whole volume of human nature, by the Hand of Divinity itself, and can never be erased or obscured by mortal power. (1793)

**Excerpts from Thomas Jefferson Government**:

Those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever he had a chosen people, whose breasts he has made his particular deposit for substantial and genuine virtue. (1784)

Men... are naturally divided into two parties. Those who fear and distrust the people... Those who identify themselves with the people, have confidence in them, cherish and consider them as the most honest and safe... depository of the public interest. (1824)

I have such reliance on the good sense of the body of the people and the honesty of their leaders that I am not afraid of their letting things go wrong to any length in any cause. (1788)

Whenever the people are well-informed, they can be trusted with their own government; whenever things get so far wrong as to attract their notice, they may be relied on to set them to rights. (1789)

I am not among those who fear the people. They, and not the rich, are our dependence for continued freedom. (1816)

I have great confidence in the common sense of mankind in general. (1800)

My most earnest wish is to see the republican element of popular control pushed to the maximum of its practicable exercise. I shall then believe that our government may be pure and perpetual. (1816)

For the general operations of manufacture, let our workshops remain in Europe. It is better to carry provisions and materials to workmen there, than bring them to the provisions and materials, and with them their manners and principles. The loss by the transportation of commodities across the Atlantic will be made up in happiness and permanence of government. The mobs of great cities add just so much to the support of pure government, as sores do to the strength of the human body. (1787)

**KEY TERMS:** Natural Right, Reason, Republican Theory, The people, Nullification, Federal Union or Compact, Religious Freedom

**GUIDING QUESTIONS:**

1. Jefferson and Hamilton are generally presented via contrast but what broad agreements do they share on very profound political issues of their day?
2. What is the source of Hamilton’s and Jefferson’s disagreement about government? Where do they diverge most dramatically?
3. Where would Jefferson and Hamilton come down on today’s party split? Why does neither man fall into one camp or the other? What has changed?