

Jefferson, Adams, and the Republic

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Though I occupy this podium with trepidation, I do so out of necessity. Trepidation because I don't possess credentials sufficient to justify participation on any peer plane with the accomplished scholars who constitute this assembly. Necessity because, at least where our host is concerned, I am obliged to sing for my supper, metaphorically if not literally.

And for a student of Jefferson, lifelong, this is truly a moveable feast, occurring at this venue especially, a feast of such magnitude and consequence that it requires a mighty song, a song whose melody and lyrics far exceed the capacity of this earnest yet very ordinary student. Though I've explored extensively the voluminous correspondence between Jefferson and Adams and have studied their complex relationship, any number of you in this audience can better provide historical analysis, character assessment, and contextual sweep where these two monumental figures are concerned.

What my idiosyncratic song can do, perhaps, is to relate the continuing impact these men and their ideas, and especially the style and manner in which they expressed those ideas, have had on the public life of one of their students, a public life spanning exactly the number of years—forty-nine—as the Adams-Jefferson correspondence.

For my public life and service began as a student volunteer for John Kennedy and continues, in a modest way, to the present date.

In the almost five decades between what were a brief campaign for an assassinated presidential candidate, a long campaign for another, unsuccessful candidate, two terms in the United States Senate, yet another unsuccessful presidential candidacy, my own, followed by more than two decades as a concerned and sometimes involved private citizen.

To characterize this personal half century as improbable is to engage in massive understatement. My song today is not about that life but about the affect of the ideas of Adams, Jefferson, and other Founders of our Republic *on* that life.

For, like Machiavelli, from an early age I delighted in retiring at day's end to my little study to commune with the ancients. "I enter the ancient courts of the men of antiquity," he wrote, "where...I am not too timid to speak with them and ask them about the reasons for their actions; and they in their courtesy answer me." In Machiavelli's case he communed with Livy, Cato, and Cicero. In my case I commune with Jefferson, Adams, Hamilton, and their remarkable colleagues in revolution.

This, in my case, was not for the purpose of retreating from the confusion of the times—and they have been mightily confusing—but rather to seek understanding and guidance *for* these times, mostly by way of studying the distance between who we Americans were meant to be and who we have actually become.

This has not been a study in historical transition from the 18th to the 21st century, but rather an inquiry into first principles.

What did these people know about history, forms of government, human frailty, and Fortune that would enable them, for the first time in the great transit of humanity, to create a political engine that would run of itself? And what did they tell us that might

cause it to quit running centuries later. Most of all, what kind of nation, what kind of people, did they want us to be?

They knew, as John Pocock has written, that *time* was the enemy of all republics. They knew that republics required maintenance and that maintenance took the form of civic virtue, the need for citizens to take their duties seriously, and that those duties involved participation and attention to their public business.

Foremost among all the Founders, Jefferson understood that participation had to be informed and that public education was the key to thoughtful evaluation of the information that a free and competitive press could and should provide. The press had to be free of government influence in order to report on the government's activities or lack thereof. But citizen readers had to be able to understand what those reports said the government was or was not doing and even whether the press reports themselves seemed accurate and unbiased.

The Republic, where the people are sovereign, the Founders knew, required virtuous and engaged citizens who were sufficiently educated to evaluate unfettered stories concerning the issues of the day, issues that affected their lives and, in the words of the Constitution's preamble, "our posterity."

Time was the problem, both in the immediate sense of the hours required from hard working farmers, laborers, and mechanics, and time in the sense of history where almost inevitable citizen lassitude and self-interest would lay the republic open to the depredations of the narrow interests that represented corruption, the deadliest poison of republics throughout the ages.

Where the good of the commonwealth—what today we would call the public interest--is not preserved by civic virtue, narrow interest prevail and the republic is corrupted. From Athens, through Rome, Venice, the Swiss cantons, the Scottish Enlightenment, and virtually all other experiments with republicanism, four qualities have been required for a genuine republic: popular sovereignty, civic virtue, a sense of the common good, and resistance to corruption.

Our Founders knew these qualities to be inseparable. If citizens did not exercise their sovereignty by participating in self-government the sense of the common good was lost and narrow interests corrupted the republic. Time was the enemy. Citizens might not take the time to perform their duties and, over time, the people would surrender their sovereignty, the commonwealth would give way to narrow interests, and decay would overtake the republic.

Until the founding of the American Republic, republics had collapsed from within by the corrosion caused by corrupting narrow interests. Or they have fallen prey to the ambitions of empire—an equal evil in the minds of Jefferson and Adams. “We go not abroad”, said Adams’s son, a convert to Jeffersonian republicanism, “seeking monsters to destroy.” But then, 175 years later, some who had read neither John Quincy Adams nor Thomas Jefferson, did exactly that.

These twin dangers, corruption and imperial ambition, require the attention of 21st century citizens of the Adams-Jefferson Republic. If corruption in a republic is defined as supplanting the common good with narrow interests, then by that definition the 21st century American Republic is massively corrupt—and, therefore, in danger. Likewise,

declaring war on terror as an excuse for remaking whole troubled regions, in this case the Middle East, simply places the United States in the shoes of the already fading British Empire a century ago. At no time in human history has a republic also been an empire. For authority, simply ask the first century B.C. Romans.

History, including the American history we have been studying this week, is not an exercise in nostalgia. At its truest and most intense, attention to history is a search for guideposts. We are not here looking at Jefferson and Adams as quaint artifacts. We are considering them, yet again, to find out what they knew that we *should* know—especially what we should know that would enable us to keep our Republic.

Against the backdrop of a lifelong preoccupation with Jefferson, a decade and a half ago I became a student of the republic, motivated by the simplest of puzzlements: if we call ourselves a democracy, why do we salute the flag of a republic? It would be abstruse questions like this that would cause pundits and ward heelers alike to wonder what I was doing in the precincts of politics let alone in the United States Senate.

Of course, we all know the Founders used the language and concepts of the ancient republics and for some, the Federalists Adams and Hamilton, the language of democracy conjured up mobs in the streets and the guillotine. But once they had solved the issue of scale, using the guidance of Montesquieu to federate the thirteen state republics, the issue of participation gave way to the perennial contest between federal and state authority--gave way for all that is except for Jefferson.

He would be years home here in Monticello after his presidency when Jefferson would write, to his renewed friend Adams and others, that they had forgotten a central

principle of the republic—civic virtue, participation, and popular sovereignty. Where, other than voting for representatives to state capitals and to Washington, was the everyday citizen to exercise his civic responsibilities and assert his sovereignty? “The further the departure from the direct and constant control by the citizens, the less has the government of the ingredient of republicanism,” Jefferson wrote.

Jefferson characteristically answered his own question, proposing the “elementary” or “ward” republic, a mirror of and no larger in scope than the New England town meeting. These republics would engage local citizens in self government each one according to the needs of the community. Long an advocate of a strong federal government, unsurprisingly Adams was largely unresponsive and unenthusiastic.

Jefferson did not go so far as to suggest that the Constitution was flawed or should be amended to officially create a third level of governance. But he did believe that we should “divide the counties into wards of such size as that every citizen can attend, when called on, and act in person. Ascribe to them the government of their wards in all things relating to them exclusively, he wrote...”and by making every citizen an acting member of the government, and in the offices nearest and most interesting to him, will attach him by his strongest feelings to the independence of his country, and its republican constitution.”

Characteristically, Jefferson couched his political theory of citizen participation in a keen understanding of corruptible political nature: “Cherish, therefore,” he wrote to Edward Carrington, “the spirit of the people and keep alive their attention.... If once they become inattentive to public affairs, you and I , the Congress and the Assemblies, judges and governors shall all become wolves.”

Coming relatively late in life, and largely lost in a plethora of continuing Jeffersoniana, the elementary republic concept has attracted relatively little attention from the ongoing army of Jefferson scholars and, with only one exception, might be safely ignored today. But that exception is a significant one and it is this: what is the remedy for citizen alienation from government, a sense of powerlessness, in a mass democracy of 300 million people?

The Cambridge political theorist Quentin Skinner has presciently written: “The reason for wishing to bring the republican vision of politics back into view is not that it tells us how to construct a genuine democracy, one in which the government is for the people as a result of being by the people. That is for us to work out. It is simply because it conveys a warning which...we can hardly afford to ignore: that unless we place our duties before our rights, we must expect to find our rights themselves undermined.”

Could it be that yet another of Thomas Jefferson’s ideas, one that directly and immediately involves the citizen in the governance of his and her own life, could bring us home from our imperial misadventures, defeat the rampant corruption in our nation’s capital, and rescue the great Republic of America?

In the answer to that question lies the reason for our continuing fascination with both John Adams and Thomas Jefferson. And it is left to us to meditate upon the central idea of these Founders: we can only assure our liberty and our rights by the performance of our duties. And we can only perform our duties by active participation in government—in Washington, in Richmond, or in our local communities.