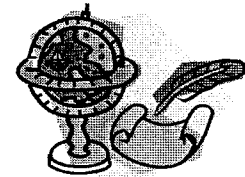


An Identity of Contrast: Defining America in the Age of Jefferson

Neal Thomas Dugre

First Place



Signed in 1783, the Paris Peace Treaty confirmed American independence from Britain and marked a new stage in the nascent United States' relationship with Europe. Although no longer subject to British authority, the U.S. was still very much dependent on its European connections after the Revolution. Isolationism remained rhetorically virile in the young republic, but actual relations functioned to bind the U.S. to the Atlantic community through what the treaty described as "beneficial and satisfactory intercourse" based on the premise of "reciprocal advantages and mutual convenience."¹ The line between favorable and dependent relations remained fine, but negotiable; delivering his First Inaugural Address in 1801, Thomas Jefferson charged Americans to seek "entangling alliances with none," but warmly encouraged relations of "peace, commerce, and honest friendship with all nations."² Jefferson's own exchanges with Europe – diplomatic, intellectual, and otherwise – made this narrow distinction possible. By engaging in such Atlantic discourse, Jefferson and his contemporaries encouraged a formative sense of American "nationalism" whereby Americans defined themselves in contrast to their European – mainly British and French – neighbors.³ This evolving identity materialized most clearly in the nation's economic and political systems. Support for free trade and the propagation of Jeffersonian Republicanism reflected the U.S.' position in the Atlantic community and, in their transformation from defensive to offensive measures, illuminated how Jefferson and other Americans clung to these elements as the core of unique American identity.

On 16 December 1793, Jefferson submitted to Congress his *Report on the Privileges and Restrictions on the Commerce of the United States in Foreign Countries*, advocating an economic system in which Americans pursued free trade as a means of crafting their niche in the Atlantic economy.⁴ Free trade in the new republic was a natural outgrowth of American experiences under colonial rule. Prior to the Revolution, Jefferson and his contemporaries lamented the exploitative nature of British commercial regulations, which forced Americans to rely on more expensive, imported goods and devalued American exports to foreign markets.⁵ Since dissatisfaction with these measures partially catalyzed the Revolution, abandoning such systems in organizing the new nation was a priority for

¹ *Paris Peace Treaty of 1783*, University of Oklahoma, College of Law, <<http://www.law.ou.edu/ushistory/paris.shtml>>.

² *Thomas Jefferson First Inaugural Address* (4 Mar. 1801), Avalon Project, <<http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/president/inaug/jefinaul.htm>>.

³ Peter S. Onuf, *Jefferson's Empire: The Language of American Nationhood* (Charlottesville, Va.: University Press of Virginia, 2000), 12.

⁴ *Report on the Privileges and Restrictions on the Commerce of the United States in Foreign Countries* (16 Dec. 1793), Avalon Project, <<http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/jeffrep2.htm>>; Merrill D. Peterson, "Thomas Jefferson and Commercial Policy, 1783-1793," *William and Mary Quarterly* 22, no. 4 (Oct., 1965), 584.

⁵ See esp. Eliga Gould and Peter S. Onuf, eds., *Empire and Nation: The American Revolution in the Atlantic World* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005); Burton Spivak, *Jefferson's English Crisis: Commerce, Embargo, and the Republican Revolution* (Charlottesville, Va.: University Press of Virginia, 1979), 4-5.

Jefferson and other political figures.⁶ While Thomas Paine suggested that it was “the interest of all Europe to have America as a free port,” Jefferson recognized Americans as the primary beneficiaries of a liberal economic system. Relieving trade “from its shackles in all parts of the world” would ultimately serve American interests by fostering an economic and diplomatic equilibrium in the Atlantic community that would free the U.S. of worrisome “entangling alliances.”⁷

According to Jefferson, the Old World’s state-controlled marketplace had “sacrificed economic freedom to political rivalry” by creating a system in which economic competition among nations bred war.⁸ For the still militarily-weak U.S., free trade was a necessary bulwark against international hostilities – a protective and cost-effective measure that would integrate the nation with the European market, but isolate it from European conflicts.⁹ Jefferson’s diplomatic mission to Europe in the 1780s made him acutely aware of ongoing tensions between France and Britain and the potential for European conflicts that might hinder America’s foreign economic interests.¹⁰ Should American politicians secure a policy of free trade with these and other European countries, Jefferson believed that the U.S. would stand to survive potential hostilities. Moreover, the U.S. stood to capitalize – “fatten on the follies of the old [nations]” – from European wars by positioning itself as a third party merchant.¹¹ Free trade suggested both economic and diplomatic neutrality. Although an ardent Francophile, Jefferson recognized the necessity of maintaining balanced relations with both France and Britain; by the early seventeenth century, “the United States was facing two powers, both powerful and both hostile to the interests of a small neutral,” a situation that demanded certain relational consistencies.¹² In order to remain separate and distinct from Europe, America needed to cast itself as a third-party nation. Jefferson’s free trade economics could cultivate such an identity in the Atlantic community while concurrently serving the practical purpose of disentangling the country from inter-European hostilities.¹³

Domestically, free trade fostered America’s identity as an agriculturalist society – home of the republican yeoman farmers that were close to Jefferson’s heart and antithetical to Europe’s lecherous manufacturers. An agricultural economy allowed the U.S. to “leave its workshops in Europe,” keeping America relatively free of the industry and related urban settlement Jefferson decried as European “wretchedness.”¹⁴ Liberated from the burden of trade tariffs, Jefferson envisioned American farmers and merchants exporting their agricultural products and importing manufactured European goods without economic detriment or competition conducive to industrial growth within the U.S. Domestic unity also found strength in free trade. On both east-west and north-south axes, Americans engaged in a system of free trade would recognize their common interests – free trade would bind “American trade and agriculture to the nation’s productive power” and provide it with an advantage in mercantile exchanges with Europe.¹⁵ This relationship was cyclical; “a steady adherence to the Union might allow the new nation to tip the scales of European

⁶ Spivak, *Jefferson’s English Crisis*, 3.

⁷ Quoted in Peterson, “Thomas Jefferson and Commercial Policy,” 588; *Report on the Privileges*.

⁸ Spivak, *Jefferson’s English Crisis*, 1-2, 68-70.

⁹ Robert W. Tucker and David C. Hendrickson, *Empire of Liberty: The Statecraft of Thomas Jefferson* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1990), 25-32.

¹⁰ Lawrence S. Kaplan, *Jefferson and France: An Essay on Politics and Political Ideas* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1967), 82-83, 88-90.

¹¹ Quoted in Lawrence S. Kaplan, “Jefferson, the Napoleonic Wars, and the Balance of Power,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 14, no. 2 (Apr., 1957), 196.

¹² Kaplan, “Jefferson, the Napoleonic Wars,” 197-198.

¹³ Spivak, *Jefferson’s English Crisis*, 1-2, 8-9.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 8.

competition in the New World for the benefit of Americans.”¹⁶ American identity deriving from free trade, then, not only came from the distinction free trade drew between the U.S. and its European trading partners, but also from the unified domestic identity born of such international juxtapositions. Moreover, economic, agricultural unity rooted in a system of free trade fortified Jeffersonian Republicanism – itself a form of American identity – within the new nation.

Jefferson’s very idea of “republicanism” derived from his interactions with Europe; republicanism was the opposite of monarchism and, thereby, the antithesis of European political systems and source of a distinct American identity.¹⁷ Ultimately, republicanism grew out of unity; “Americans could only sustain a decentralized regime, an empire without a metropolis, a consensual union of free republics, if they were a truly united people.”¹⁸ Yet, while unity fed this political system, its appeal and functionality depended equally upon an agricultural economy supported by large amounts of arable land and worked by yeoman farmers. Consequently, republicanism – however counterintuitive – demanded territorial expansions that Jefferson supported through his diplomatic relations with Europe.¹⁹ Even though Jeffersonian Republicanism advocated a small centralized government, ideally achieved in a small nation, Jefferson reasoned that additional territory would allow the nation to distribute its population and avoid the urban settlement that he considered among Europe’s pitfalls.²⁰ With the purchase of new, western lands, Jefferson effectively bought American identity. Acquiring the Louisiana Territory in 1803 doubled the U.S. in size, but, more importantly, it fed a complex system of American identity formation. Pushing the U.S. frontier to the Mississippi River made more fertile land available for farming and the distribution of America’s growing population, which was conducive to Jefferson’s republican ideals. The expansion also gave western yeoman access to the river, which they could use to transport the fruits of their labor and thereby trade their goods in domestic and foreign markets with lucrative results if done in a system of free trade.²¹ Both elements helped to distinguish the U.S. from Europe by supporting the ideals and institutions that came to signify American identity within the Atlantic community.

The territorial expansion that came to define American during the Age of Jefferson was a result of and an impetus to further interactions between the U.S. and Europe. Acquisitions like the Louisiana Purchase demanded complex and prolonged diplomatic wrangling, but also reflected America’s growing comfort with its maturing identity. Securing the Louisiana Territory from France required American diplomats to capitalize on inter-European conflicts in the very way which Jefferson believed free trade agreements might allow.²² Burdened with domestic unrest and the ongoing Napoleonic Wars, France could not maintain control of the vast North American territory it officially acquired from Spain only weeks before Napoleon transferred ownership to the U.S. In the context of France’s enduring hostilities with Britain, American control of the territory was preferable to a potential British seizure; Jefferson’s idealistic notions of increasing America’s prominence in the Atlantic community through its third-party identity seemed to work.²³ Clearly,

¹⁶ Lawrence S. Kaplan, *Entangling Alliances with None: American Foreign Policy in the Age of Jefferson* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1987), 15.

¹⁷ Joseph Ellis, *American Sphinx: The Character of Thomas Jefferson* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 260; Onuf, *Jefferson’s Empire*, 10.

¹⁸ Onuf, *Jefferson’s Empire*, 12.

¹⁹ Jon Kukla, *A Wilderness So Immense: The Louisiana Purchase and the Destiny of America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003), 207-08.

²⁰ Onuf, *Jefferson’s Empire*, 118.

²¹ Kukla, *Wilderness So Immense*, 95-102; Roger G. Kennedy, *Mr. Jefferson’s Lost Cause: Land, Farmers, Slavery, and the Louisiana Purchase* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2003), 262.

²² Kukla, *Wilderness So Immense*, see esp. Chap. 10, “Mr. Pinckney’s Mission.”

²³ Kaplan, “Jefferson, the Napoleonic Wars,” 203-05.

expansion only fed Americans' notions of their singular identity. Jefferson's various exchanges with the Comte de Buffon and other European intellectuals reflects a desire to emphasize American might – to embrace and promulgate the identity that earlier cross-Atlantic interactions helped to create.²⁴

By the end of Jefferson's tenure as president, the nation's identity was largely enmeshed in its contrast to Europe – so much so that the U.S. was willing to take more offensive actions to preserve this relationship. As Jefferson said in a letter to his friend, David Ross, “each country is left to do justice to itself and to the other according to its own ideas...and to scramble for the future as well as they can; to regulate their commerce by duties and prohibitions, and perhaps by cannons and mortars.”²⁵ Indeed, by 1807, the U.S. had become so protective of its own, defining interests that it was willing to curtail trade and even risk war with Europe – especially Great Britain.²⁶ The Embargo of 1807 reflected how “foreign commerce and domestic political consolidation had intimately connected in Jefferson's view of the American future.”²⁷ Britain's ongoing refusal to recognize American sovereignty and economic interests demanded that the U.S. design and enforce and economic embargo that might harm British economic interests – especially in the context of ongoing Napoleonic Wars. The “carrying trade” that the embargo aimed to facilitate was “a major ingredient of American commercial prosperity” making “its protection the major economic goal of Jefferson's diplomacy.”²⁸ As Jefferson's actions indicated, the U.S.' commercial prosperity, based largely on the export of agricultural goods cultivated with republican idealism, had come to define America's international identity, and its preservation was necessary to ensure the endurance of that identity, which allowed the U.S. to exist in distinction to the rest of the Atlantic world.

With the outbreak of open hostilities between the United States and Britain in 1812, the Paris Peace Treaty's aspirations for “beneficial and satisfactory intercourse” seemed lost.²⁹ Yet in the context of post-Revolutionary America, such conflicts reflected a process of identity formation by which Americans defined themselves in contrast to Europe. Jefferson himself was integral to this process, serving a “key role in defining a distinctively American position toward the external world.”³⁰ The juxtaposition was particularly illuminating in terms of the early American economic and political system. Ever-conscious of keeping America independent of Europe, Jefferson favored a policy of free trade that would help the U.S. remain free of entangling alliances and prove economically lucrative in times of war and peace. A free trade economy complemented Jefferson's vision for republicanism in the new nation, which itself relied on the primacy of agriculture and the availability of land. This complex web of systems and aspirations bore a nascent form of American identity that cast the United States in juxtaposition to the larger Atlantic community, reaffirming the nation's singularity and independence.

²⁴ Kukla, *Wilderness So Immense*, 8-9, 197.

²⁵ Quoted in Spivak, *Jefferson's English Crisis*, 3.

²⁶ Joseph Wheelan, *Jefferson's War: America's First War on Terror 1801-1805* (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 2003), 37-39.

²⁷ Spivak, *Jefferson's English Crisis*, 3.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 9.

²⁹ *Paris Peace Treaty*.

³⁰ Kaplan, *Entangling Alliances with None*, 5.

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Paris Peace Treaty of 1783. University of Oklahoma, College of Law. <<http://www.law.ou.edu/ushistory/paris.shtml>>. 4 April 2006.

This full-text, electronic copy of the Peace Treaty of 1783, which officially ended the American Revolution, is a useful barometer of American/European relations during the nation's formative years. Especially interesting are the sub-articles illuminating potential points of conflict that might arise in future foreign relations, such as U.S. rights to navigation on the Mississippi River. This edition of the treaty is also text-searchable, facilitating its usage.

Report on the Privileges and Restrictions on the Commerce of the United States in Foreign Countries (16 Dec. 1793). Avalon Project. <<http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/jeffrep2.htm>>. 4 April 2006.

Presented to Congress in 1793, Jefferson's *Report* clearly defines the state of U.S. international trade and offers suggestions as to what changes might benefit American economic interests. The *Report* is a uniquely fruitful document in that it presents a litany of American trade items – imported and exported – and associated quantitative data that scholars might use to better understand early American consumer culture and its relation to identity formation.

Thomas Jefferson First Inaugural Address (4 Mar. 1801). Avalon Project. <<http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/presiden/inaug/jefinau1.htm>>. 4 April 2006.

Delivered after the so-called “Revolution of 1800” in which Thomas Jefferson and his republican contemporaries secured control of America's federal government, this speech reveals Jefferson's political leanings and his aspirations regarding the nation's new direction. This address is especially important Jefferson delivered it at a time when U.S. relations with Europe and the rest of the Atlantic community were increasingly tense and hostile.

Secondary Sources

Ellis, Joseph. *American Sphinx: The Character of Thomas Jefferson*. New York: Vintage Books, 1998.

Ellis's work successfully tackles the ambiguity modern scholars associate with Jefferson, a man whose rhetoric and actions sometimes appeared in discord. This book is rich in numerous topics related to Jefferson, but in the context of this paper it is important in suggesting the significance of Jefferson's European relations in the evolution of his own and America's identity.

Gould, Eliga and Peter S. Onuf. Eds. *Empire and Nation: The American Revolution in the Atlantic World*. Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005.

This collection of articles offers scholars a fresh perspective on the American Revolution, one which considers the war in relation to a broader Atlantic World. The various contributions to this work suggest that the American Revolution was not simply an indigenous, insular event, but rather one that responded to various pressures felt throughout the early modern world. Interested readers will find the detailed notes and bibliography useful in pursuing further research.

Kaplan, Lawrence S. *Entangling Alliances with None: American Foreign Policy in the Age of Jefferson*. Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1987.

Kaplan is an unmatched expert on the nature of Jeffersonian foreign policy and Jefferson's own personal relations with Europe, and this book is certainly his most celebrated work. Kaplan readily engages the sometimes contentious discourse about American diplomacy in the years immediately following the Revolution. Readers will find the extensive references and index useful.

-----, *Jefferson and France: An Essay on Politics and Political Ideas*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1967.

The first of Kaplan's books on Jefferson's foreign relations, this book considers Jefferson's reputation as a Francophile and relates it to the actual shape of his diplomatic policies. Kaplan shows that while Jefferson preferred France to Britain, ultimately the relationship was one aimed at securing American advantage in Europe.

-----, "Jefferson, the Napoleonic Wars, and the Balance of Power." *William and Mary Quarterly* 14, no. 2 (Apr. 1967), 196-217.

Kaplan's article looks closely at the influence France's Napoleonic Wars had in directing the character of American/French relations in the early-nineteenth century. Kaplan's analysis is heavily based on correspondence – personal and official – which indicates potentially rich resources for readers interested in pursuing the topic further. The necessity of maintaining equilibrium between European powers is Kaplan's primary focus, and the main achievement of this article.

Kennedy, Roger G. *Mr. Jefferson's Lost Cause: Land, Farmers, Slavery, and the Louisiana Purchase*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.

Unlike Kukla, who analyzes the Louisiana Purchase on a broader level, Kennedy considers this territorial expansion in terms of its relationship to slavery. While Kennedy's discussion is one that tends to exceed the boundaries of this paper, his work is helpful in augmenting Kukla's conclusions about the determinative nature of Jefferson's policy for acquiring and using land in the new nation.

Kukla, Jon. *A Wilderness So Immense: The Louisiana Purchase and the Destiny of America*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003.

A very current analysis of the Louisiana Purchase and Jefferson's role in it, Kukla's work is unmatched in its detail or sophistication of discourse. The real success of this work is in Kukla's capacity to link the complex factual history of America's purchase of the Louisiana Territory with the more vague Jeffersonian ideals feeding the acquisition. Kukla includes transcriptions of associated documents and a very detailed bibliography to assist his readers in appreciating the Purchase's significance.

Onuf, Peter S. *Jefferson's Empire: The Language of American Nationhood*. Charlottesville, Va.: University of Virginia Press, 2000.

A celebrated expert on Thomas Jefferson and his political thought, Onuf's work crafts a strong link between the practical and ideological premises of Jefferson's American "Empire." Researchers will find assistance in the extensive references and bibliography that Onuf provides, and navigating the book is made particularly easy by its clear, chronological organization. Although perhaps exceeding the scope of Onuf's study, a more comprehensive work might also consider Jefferson's pre-Revolutionary experience with and concept of empire.

Peterson, Miller D. "Thomas Jefferson and Commercial Policy, 1783-1793." *William and Mary Quarterly* 22, no. 4 (Oct., 1965), 584-610.

While slightly old, this article remains useful and informative as a focused study of Jefferson's commercial policy prior to his tenure as president. Peterson affords particular attention to Jefferson's 1793 *Report on the Privileges and Restrictions on the Commerce of the United States in Foreign Countries*, suggesting that it constituted the beginning of a Jeffersonian economic policy that favored free trade and France. Peterson is uniquely rich in the detail he affords to the relationship between free trade and peace during the late-eighteenth century.

Spivak, Burton. *Jefferson's English Crisis: Commerce, Embargo, and the Republican Revolution*. Charlottesville, Va.: University Press of Virginia, 1979.

Perhaps the most thoughtful and comprehensive analysis of American/British relations during the Age of Jefferson, Spivak's work is equally useful in obtaining a more general sense of Jefferson's intentions in division American foreign policy. A thorough index permits readers to appreciate the scope of Spivak's inquiry, just as his extensive bibliographical essay illuminates historiographical trends in Jeffersonian studies.

Tucker, Robert W. and David C. Hendrickson. *Empire of Liberty: The Statecraft of Thomas Jefferson*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990.

Tucker and Hendrickson's study of Jefferson's statecraft in the new nation remains a crucial work in directing historians' understanding of the ideological origins of Jefferson's "empire of liberty." Readers gain a unique understanding of Jeffersonian Republicanism, particularly regarding the complex balance between territorial expansion and party rhetoric. This work also succeeds in linking Jefferson's early life to the evolution of his political principles.

Wheelan, Joseph. *Jefferson's War: America's First War on Terror 1801-1805*. New York: Carroll & Graff Publishers, 2003.

Wheelan's monograph is most concerned with the early-nineteenth century Barbary Wars, but it does present readers with thoughtful analysis of Jefferson's motivation for allowing conflict between the U.S. and foreign nations. Readers will find Wheelan's index especially useful in navigating the book, although the work might benefit from a bibliographical essay instead of the sometimes cryptic reference notes.