

# *The Revolutionary Conservatism of Jefferson's Small Republics*

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BY THE EARLY TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY, Americans had become accustomed to, even took for granted, virtually everything against which George Washington and Thomas Jefferson had warned: gigantic public and private debt, a massive national government, entangling foreign alliances, a standing army, undeclared war in the form of military interventionism, the destruction of American agrarianism, and the list goes on. What some called a "New World Order," others an "Imperial America," had become very nearly the equivalent of the former Soviet Union: a huge, unwieldy, unsustainable, bureaucratic, increasingly totalized state. Given the gigantism of the American state by the beginning of the twenty-first century, one finds it hard to recall that this was not always the case, that indeed, even fifty years before, let alone a hundred and fifty, the American polis was weighted much more toward the local and regional than to the national government. In the course of its history, the very notion of an American confederation had been lost. In what follows, we will explore and seek to recover the revolutionary conservative principle of Jeffersonian American autonomy.

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I have elsewhere pointed out that by the early twenty-first century United States, the terms "Left" and "Right," though used often enough polemically, no longer could be clearly differentiated as regards centralization of state power. Up to the mid-twentieth century, the Old Right conservatives stood in the Jeffersonian tradition that encouraged confederation and local or regional rather than national authority, and opposed, for instance, the New Deal. But already in January of 1952, the outlines of a "New Right" began to appear, when William F. Buckley wrote in *Commonweal* that "we have to accept Big Government for the duration—for neither an offensive nor defensive war can be waged given our present government skills, except through the instrument of a totalitarian bureaucracy within our shores.... And if they deem Soviet power [or terrorism, or whatever, one might add] a menace to our freedom...they will have to support large armies and air forces, atomic energy, central intelligence, war production boards, and the attendant centralization of power in Washington." By the early twenty-first century, such a perspective had manifested itself clearly in the second Bush administration, which oversaw a "centralization of power in Washington" like none before.

In the meantime, what became known as the New Left, from the 1960s onward,

became identified at least to a significant extent with opposition to what President Eisenhower had warned against, the military-industrial complex. Up to this period, such opposition belonged primarily to the Old Right—but by the end of the twentieth century, opposition to the merged power of corporations and of the American military was to be found almost entirely on the Left. A figure like Noam Chomsky, for example, oftentimes seemed to stand nearly alone as a critic of the centralized American military-industrial state—and what is more, by the early twenty-first century, was being bitterly attacked from the “Right,” by someone like David Horowitz, who thirty years before had identified himself as on the “Left.” Such a situation is, in terms of basic principles, approaching a Babel of confusion. It would seem that the Left had become identified with the critique of centralized power, and the Right had become its defender, precisely the reverse of what had been the case earlier in the twentieth century.

One might suggest, cynically but with considerable accuracy, that whatever side is in power is in favor of centralizing power for themselves. Thus, during the Roosevelt era, the critics of centralized power were on the Right—yet when the pendulum of power swung to the other side at the end of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, then it was the Left who largely stood against centralized military-industrial power. Who could doubt, really, that if the Left had been given the reins of power in the United States during this period too, its representatives would seek to enforce its own dictates and undoubtedly would not have an agenda of dismantling the very state and all its perquisites that they had so recently won? On the question of centralizing state bureaucratic power, “Left” and “Right” are in fact fundamentally similar: the opposition only comes from those who are not in power. From this perspec-

tive, the tendency of national government to accrue ever more power cannot be arrested, let alone reversed.

What we do see, in other words, is the seemingly unstoppable growth of what Paul Gottfried and others have termed the “managerial state.” Having generated a gigantic national bureaucracy of education, or of entitlement programs, or of the military-industrial-security apparatus, that apparatus continues regardless of who is in putative power. Indeed, when the “Right” is in charge, the power of the national government to mandate programs and requirements to the states—and the transfer of a whole range of powers from state to federal courts—actually increases, as is evident in the 1980s and again in the early twenty-first century. What endures and grows is the centralized managerial state, which corresponds to and indeed dovetails with the managerial, centralized structure of huge, multinational corporations.

And, of course, there is the related problem—diagnosed with considerable accuracy by Carl Schmitt during the Weimar Republic of the 1920s—that we may term the paralytic nature of parliamentary liberalism. During the Weimar Republic, legislators spent a great deal of time in discussion and posturing, but were unable to address the fundamental problems of the period. Close study of the *fin de siècle* United States Congress and the executive branch reveals a similar if more exaggerated dynamic: much posturing and mugging for cameras on the part of legislators or presidents, but when it comes to all the fundamental issues of the day, one sees only a continuation of the *status quo*. A skyrocketing national debt, massive individual and corporate indebtedness on a scale never seen before in history, a deteriorating natural world, and a seemingly total inability to encourage conservation of energy: here are the fundamental problems of the day, yet both the national legislature and the

executive branch were incapable of addressing them because, in large part, their policies were to a significant degree *responsible* for those very problems.

Given the brief history to which we have alluded here, it is self-evident that while political power is cyclical—Democratic partisan power wanes, and Republican power waxes, or the reverse—one can see a larger pattern in which the national government gathers more and more power to itself. In times of economic distress, like the economic depression of the 1930s, that power accrues to those who propose that the national government can protect citizens economically; and in times of security threats, as in the 2000s, that power accrues to those who propose, once again, that the national government can protect citizens if only more power is given to it. But it is only natural that if power is accrued in one place, it is drawn from another. This is the *real* and much longer-term cycle of power. Ascension to national legislative, executive, and judicial hegemony of Democrats or Republicans is, from this longer perspective, only ancillary to the larger question of whether power is flowing inexorably *toward* the national government, or away from it. The course of the twentieth and early twenty-first century shows only the former course of centralization of power.

That authority is drawn from somewhere. From where, you ask? The answer, of course, is from states, regions, localities, families, and individuals. The more that the national government claims authority to issue all manner of ever-expanding legislative and executive or judicial edicts, the less authority is vested in what Jefferson called the “little republics” upon which the American republic as a whole depends. Thus, when power rests with the local community or the state, so too there rests responsibility and accountability. But the more that the national government issues edicts—always in the name of some greater good

and draped with moralizing, often hypocritical rhetoric—the less authority rests with states, communities, and individuals. Eventually, the national government issues edicts concerning whether one can live or die, whether one ought to wear a restraining belt in a vehicle, whether a state court can rule on what is in its obvious jurisdiction—the list multiplies with extraordinary rapidity.

There can be no doubt that the Founding Fathers considered the authority of individual states to be extremely important. We will recall that the first two of the Articles of Confederation are these: “Article I. The Stile of this Confederacy shall be ‘The United States of America.’ Article II. Each state retains its sovereignty, freedom, and independence, and every power, jurisdiction, and right, which is not by this Confederation expressly delegated to the United States, in Congress assembled.” From this we can see that the first substantive point of the Articles of Confederation—agreed to by Congress November 15, 1777; ratified and in force, March 1, 1781—was none other than to protect the authority of the individual states. The same authority was protected in the Constitution’s Tenth Amendment on the Powers of the States and People, which reads “The powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to the States respectively, or to the people.” Thomas Jefferson made interpretation of this statement absolutely clear: “The States supposed that by their tenth amendment, they had secured themselves against constructive powers.”<sup>1</sup> Even more explicitly, he wrote “I consider the foundation of the Constitution as laid on this ground: That ‘all powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to the States or to the people.’ To take a single step beyond the boundaries thus specifically drawn around the powers of Congress, is to take possession

of a boundless field of power, no longer susceptible of any definition.”<sup>2</sup>

Jefferson furthermore held that the federal government had authority over foreign affairs, while the states had authority over domestic affairs. He insisted that “To the State governments are reserved all legislation and administration in affairs which concern their own citizens only, and to the federal government is given whatever concerns foreigners or the citizens of other States; these functions alone being made federal. The one is the domestic, the other the foreign branch of the same government; neither having control over the other, but within its own department. There are one or two exceptions only to this partition of power.”<sup>3</sup> Jefferson added, “With respect to our State and federal governments, I do not think their relations correctly understood by foreigners. They generally suppose the former subordinate to the latter. But this is not the case. They are co-ordinate departments of one simple and integral whole.”<sup>4</sup> Such an interpretation of the relations between state and national authority no doubt appears radical today, but Jefferson laid great emphasis upon it.

What happened to the state powers? As Thomas Jefferson put it in a letter to James Monroe in 1797, “The system of the General Government is to seize all doubtful ground. We must join in the scramble, or get nothing. Where first occupancy is to give right, he who lies still loses all.”<sup>5</sup> To John Taylor, Jefferson wrote already in 1798 “It is a singular phenomenon that while our State governments are the very *best in the world*, without exception or comparison, our General Government has, in the rapid course of nine or ten years, become more arbitrary and has swallowed more of the public liberty than even that of England.”<sup>6</sup> It is clear that already before the turn of the nineteenth century, Jefferson worried about the absorption of more and more power by the

national government. But the encroachment of national authority upon that of states and localities happened incrementally, and over the course of centuries, not decades. And what recourse is there for the states? Jefferson recommended a convention of the states in order that they might insist on retaining those powers to be otherwise usurped by the national government.<sup>7</sup>

It is clear, when we look over the course of American history through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, that we see disproportionately more and more national power, but it is also clear that Jefferson today too would urge the reversal of that tendency, so that power flows back from the national toward state and local authorities. Later in life, Jefferson emphasized the importance of what he called the “little republics” as essential to the sustenance of an enduring larger republic. He wrote to John Cartwright that each ward or township should be like “a small republic within itself, and every man in the State would thus become an acting member of the common government, transacting in person a great portion of its rights and duties, subordinate indeed, yet important, and entirely within his competence. The wit of man cannot devise a more solid basis for a free, durable and well-administered republic.”<sup>8</sup> Wards are to be responsible for a local judge, “a constable, a military company, a patrol, a school, the care of their own poor, their own portion of the public roads.”<sup>9</sup> In his view, the strength of the republic as a whole—and for that matter, the vitality of the original American Revolution—lay nowhere but in the strength of the little republics.<sup>10</sup> Jefferson would have deplored the topsy growth of the national government.

Jefferson saw the townships or wards as the essential key to an enduring larger republic. He wrote that “There are two subjects, indeed, which I shall claim a right to further as long as I breathe: the

public education, and the sub-division of counties into wards. I consider the continuance of republican government as absolutely hanging on these two hooks.”<sup>11</sup> In his autobiography, Jefferson also outlined this vision: “Every state again is divided into counties, each to take care of what lies within its local bounds; each county again into townships or wards, to manage minuter details; and every ward into farms, to be governed each by its individual proprietor.... It is by this partition of cares descending in gradation from general to particular that the mass of human affairs may be best managed for the good and prosperity of all.”<sup>12</sup> He even went so far as to write Joseph Cabell in 1816 that “As Cato then concluded every speech with the words, ‘Cathago delenda est,’ so do I every opinion with the injunction, ‘divide the counties into wards.’”<sup>13</sup>

But does the Jeffersonian vision have any currency in a world inclined so much toward gigantism in every sphere? One could certainly dismiss it as an historical artifact of the early republic, suitable for a period now long since gone and, indeed, forgotten. A township cannot be responsible for, say, a nuclear power plant and its ten-thousand-year nuclear waste; a township cannot be responsible for its part of a national highway system, or a huge university. It would seem that in a highly technological age—in which all aspects of society are bound together through the interconnected wires and frequencies of massive technical apparatus—a Jeffersonian republic is no longer possible. Only a totalizing state authority can be comparable in scope to the massive system of technics within which it exists, and in which the Jeffersonian township, from this view, is but an anachronism.

Given what happened to the American republic over the course of the twentieth century, one has to ask how one might reverse this flow of power. At first, the task would seem overwhelming and impossible. It would not be enough to call a

convention of individual states, as Jefferson suggested in 1824, for after all, the fundamental composition of society has changed irrevocably. Jefferson assumes the primacy of the farming family, but by the end of the twentieth century, remaining farmers were so few as no longer even to have a space on the national census form! If 99 percent of the population or more does not farm, or even live on or near a farm, then the very foundation of townships or wards, as Jefferson saw it, is gone. It would seem that the fabric of society would need to change in order for a Jeffersonian republic to reappear. Would such a thing be possible? Again, it would appear not. Nor would it be likely that twenty-first-century American society could escape the consequences of usury and massive personal, corporate, and public indebtedness, nor of an unstable fiat currency, nor of the chaos and incredible wastefulness of globalist “free trade,” let alone of the destruction of farmland and of rural American life. Such a society is on a trajectory away from a Jeffersonian republic, not towards it.

What, then, does the Jeffersonian vision offer us? There are several possibilities. One is that the Jeffersonian republic represents an ideal that now must be realized somewhere other than in America. Since American society has gone so far in its trajectory away from the Jeffersonian ideal, one could argue that it is best to abandon any vestigial hope of restoration, and that instead the Jeffersonian vision might be realized somewhere else, in some other land where there are still small farms and vital towns where republican ideals could flourish. Proponents of such a view would argue that the Jeffersonian republic is not intrinsically American, but universal in nature, and that there is no inherent reason that it could not be realized in Italy, or in New Zealand, or in Russia, for example. We should not dismiss this pos-

sibility out of hand.

Yet one must wonder whether the Jeffersonian republic is entirely impossible in the United States. A major error of most recent political philosophers is to think only in the titanic terms common to the modern age, only of massive economic and political systems and grand, abstract terms that lend themselves to the sweeping and often destructive proclamations of distant rulers in Washington, Moscow, or Peking. But why is it not possible to begin to reverse the trend by concentrating on one's own locale and region? Perhaps the problem is not that too many roads lead to Rome, but rather that we pay far too much attention to them, and not nearly enough attention to the roads that lead to our own locale. The Jeffersonian republic relies upon a foundation of educated, responsible local citizens. Citizens of suitable localities and regions need only begin to reassert themselves in their townships, counties, and states, and thereby alone they will begin to reverse the trend of power from the global or national back toward the regional and local.

Such a reversal is certainly possible. It is true that the twentieth century saw the precipitous decline and near-disappearance of American agrarianism. Furthermore, the twentieth century saw the profligate destruction of some of America's richest farmland, which was covered with monotonous subdivisions and malls. But much good land still remained at the beginning of the twenty-first century, and indeed it remained possible, for those who wanted, to purchase a small farm, and to rebuild rural communities and towns. In the long term, such an agrarian renaissance is not a pipe dream, but a simple and straightforward necessity. It only makes sense that in a stable and truly prosperous society, food will be grown nearby, just as most manufactured goods will be built in one's own region and not shipped around the globe.

How do we know that such a move-

ment toward agrarianism and localism is possible? Agrarian localism continued throughout the twentieth century in the form of Amish and other Anabaptist communities; and it continued to exist in other pockets across the country. It exists, in fact, anywhere that local citizens have come together, created their own "little republic," and begun to build a more prosperous and self-sufficient community right there where they live. Miner County, South Dakota, is an example: its citizens chose to emphasize raising cattle organically, and building wind turbines in order to create a stable local economy and to reverse the trend of depopulation that nearly overcame them in the latter twentieth century. Such a reversal has to be rooted in particular townships, counties, and regions, and it has to emerge from the commitment of citizens.

If indeed, as Jefferson envisioned, local communities are to be responsible for police, for local governance, for care of the poor, for schools, for a military company, and for roads, the desire for such responsibilities must originate from local citizens themselves. "Little republics" depend entirely upon the willingness of citizens to take responsibility for their community and region. State and national government should institute policies that encourage such local responsibility—or, to put it another way, they should refrain from inserting themselves into every local decision. A Michigan township spent more than a year fashioning a local ordinance concerning giant hog and chicken factories—only to have the Republican-controlled legislature invalidate their ordinance with state-wide legislation that forbade local control over agri-industry. Why? Simple: because multinational corporations had purchased the coöperation of a sufficient quantity of state legislators. Each legislative or executive decision of this kind shifts power away from localities, and toward a centralized, often corrupt state or toward federal po-

litical operators. By contrast, a Jeffersonian republic would encourage enlightened local decisions.

Of course, there is a very real problem that remains. What if benighted and selfish representatives govern a township? That is a risk one has to take, but it is arguably less of a risk than that state or federal representatives might be inclined to make selfish, destructive decisions—because the range of impact is so much greater in the national or state than in the local case. Furthermore, township or county representatives are closer to their own constituents, who know them personally, are their neighbors, and are not as likely to let them get away with destructive policies. On balance, local and regional decision-making—though far from perfect—is less likely (for example) to export local manufacturing capacity to foreign lands, or to encourage the destruction of regional agriculture than are its distant and corpulent overlords in a profligate far-away Rome.

What we are exploring here is not some grand utopian scheme to be implemented by national fiat, but rather a profound change of emphasis that, to be successful, would take many decades to ramify and finally bear fruit. Given that it took over a century for the United States to centralize power in the national government and to divest itself of many family farms, small towns, and local manufacturing, no doubt it would be the work of another century to restore a prosperous, stable, and in the most profound sense of the word, a *conservative* America. Such a course of events would come about only

through a gradual reorientation of power back toward local communities and regions, encouraged by national and state policies consciously intended to restore America's little republics, policies driven not by the lucre of lobbyists, but rather informed by the fundamental principles outlined with such clarity by Thomas Jefferson.

We have tried the Hamiltonian experiment of centralized government, usury, and gigantism long enough. Surely it is time, somewhere, for the Jeffersonian vision to begin to reappear, like Polaris or the Pleiades emerging again from behind the clouds and orienting us toward a more balanced way of life, showing us anew the course that we must take. Jefferson recognized what was to happen, and wrote to Gideon Granger in 1800: "Our country is too large to have all its affairs directed by a single government. Public servants at such a distance, and from under the eye of their constituents, must, from the circumstance of distance, be unable to administer and overlook all the details necessary for the good government of the citizens; and the same circumstance, by rendering detection impossible to their constituents, will invite public agents to corruption, plunder and waste."<sup>14</sup> The cure for this fatal disease of the polity is the noble tradition of American autonomy, for as Jefferson put it, "The wit of man cannot devise a more solid basis for a free, durable and well-administered republic."<sup>15</sup> It is high time that we begin to heed his wise and enduring advice.

1. Jefferson to William Johnson, 1823. ME 15:450.  
2. Jefferson: National Bank Opinion, 1791. ME 3:146. 3. Jefferson to John Cartwright, 1824. ME 16:47. 4. Jefferson to John Cartwright, 1824. ME 16:47. 5. Jefferson to James Monroe, 1797. ME 9:423. 6. Jefferson to John Taylor, 1798. ME 10:65. 7. Jefferson to John Cartwright, 1824. ME 16:47. 8. Jefferson to John Cartwright, 1824. ME 16:46. 9.

Jefferson to John Adams, 1813. ME 13:400. 10. Jefferson to John Tyler, 1810. ME 12:394. 11. Jefferson to Joseph C. Cabell, 1814. ME 14:84. 12. Thomas Jefferson, *Autobiography* (1821). ME 1:122. 13. Jefferson to Joseph C. Cabell, 1816. ME 14:423. 14. Jefferson to Gideon Granger, 1800. ME 10:167. 15. Jefferson to John Cartwright, 1824. ME 16:46.