

# Interpretation

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# Interpretation

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## Book Reviews

Robert W. Tucker and David C. Hendrickson, *Empire of Liberty: The Statecraft of Thomas Jefferson* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), xvi + 360 pp., \$24.95.

WILL MORRISEY

The American regime promotes what the British call “pacifism”—not pacifism as the rejection of all war in all circumstances, but pacifism as the intent to establish civil and international peace by peaceful means when possible, by warlike means only when necessary. (Predictably, the delimitation of necessity has proven controversial.) Unlike Rome, even republican Rome, America seeks no military empire. French boys once gazed at the silhouette of Napoleon and murmured, “*Son ombre m’a guide.*” American boys imitate soldiers they see in the movies, as one of the games they usually leave behind; of them one cannot say, as André Malraux said of the French, “There is not one of us who has not conquered Europe in his dreams.”

The American Founders designed our institutions to nurture pacifism. They saw that war would swell the government, threatening republicanism. They channeled Americans’ ambitions into commerce and politics, anticipating that future ambitions would not exclude the sciences, arts, and letters. Nonetheless, the universalism of American principles—all men are created equal, with unalienable rights—could also lead to a certain messianism, an inclination to intervene militarily on behalf of a self-interest deemed universally wholesome. And worldwide free trade may at times require a military defense. While “one part” of Thomas Jefferson’s mind “feared contamination” from the world, the authors write, another “wished genuinely to reform” the world, a task that required some sort of contact with it.

Jefferson hoped to overturn the regnant doctrine of “reason of state” in international politics. With Machiavelli, his contemporaries in European capitals believed that

The political community’s security, independence, and continuity took precedence over all other interests, private or public. The supremacy of foreign policy, of the state and its necessities over civil life, was the inevitable consequence of this ordering. (P.13)

Jefferson “rejected the whole apparatus of the modern state that had emerged in Europe in the eighteenth century”—funded debt, executive power, heavy taxa-

tion, government-supported manufactures, and a standing military—which he feared as “the very essence of tyrannical government” (p.16). Still, he did not “renounce the ambitions that normally led to the use of these means”—economic and technological progress, territorial expansion (p.18). Jefferson wanted the best of both Romes, “both empire and liberty” (p.20). It is no wonder that Alexander Hamilton, a man with far fewer reservations about modernity, viewed Jefferson with scant patience, or that Jefferson suspected Hamilton of monarchic ambition.

“‘To conquer without war’—that objective, the French diplomat Turreau observed in 1805, was ‘the first fact’ of Jeffersonian politics” (p.18). Threats of war, threats of making hostile alliances, and the “peaceable coercion” of domestic commercial legislation designed to help friends and harm enemies were Jefferson’s preferred means. The United States shall, he wrote to Thomas Pinckney, “endeavor so to form our *commercial* regulations as that justice from other nations shall be their mechanical result” (p.19).

The authors recall Jefferson’s well-known defense of agrarianism, which he supposed would cultivate virtue and independence, and his hostility to manufactures, the foundation of modern despotism. They see that Jefferson understood that agrarianism wedded to “progress” required territorial expansion and free trade. Territorial expansion and the defense of free trade could lead to war, state aggrandizement, and finally despotism. But isolationism would require Americans to provide their own manufactures, equally yielding despotism in the long run. Jefferson hoped to break into European markets by threatening to withhold American agricultural produce in “a contest of self-denial,” a non-violent test of virtue with corrupt and corrupting Europe (pp.35–36). The authors notice that this blend of the “liberal” principle of virtuous citizen-spirit “suggests that the tendency among historians to set these ideas in opposition—at least in the realm of foreign policy—is more misleading than enlightening” (p.36). They rightly describe Jefferson as “closely identifying the pursuit of the national interest with the vindication of natural right” (p.62).

The first and more successful of the two Jefferson administrations secured the Louisiana Purchase, “one of the great political windfalls in American history” (p.98). In so doing, Jefferson evidently violated his strict-construction constitutionalism that he designed his policy of peaceful coercion to defend (p.94), but at least (one is inclined to add) he strengthened the social and economic conditions of agrarianism, which served as much a means to liberty as his constitutionalism did. The authors do not quite convey Jefferson’s dilemma here, which was to coordinate three different means—peaceful coercion, constitutionalism, and agrarianism—in order to obtain the ends of liberty and virtue. That these means might not always be maximized simultaneously, that they might at times conflict, and that the Jeffersonian statesman could reluctantly but in good conscience sacrifice one of them temporarily, should have been more fully acknowledged. It is not a problem of excessive “moral-

ism,” as the authors claim more than once, but of moral judgment, of the adjustment of rival moral goods. The authors return to sounder criticisms in describing Jefferson’s subsequent attempt to acquire the Florida territories from Spain. The United States had no legal claim to these, and the advance of the claim only irritated Spanish pride. The methods of peaceful coercion failed; with Spain they failed outright, and with France they succeeded only by the accident of Napoleon’s military blunders in both the New World and Europe.

The second Jefferson Administration saw the failure of peaceful coercion in the maritime crisis with Great Britain. Severely threatened by Napoleon’s ambitions, the British undertook the impressment of American seamen and restricted American neutral trade. Jefferson was not merely unsympathetic, he was morally outraged. “The administration’s sense of American power was so extensive and its conception of American rights and interests so unbending that no negotiated settlement with England was possible” (p.202). Jefferson imposed a set of draconian embargo laws, abridging American rights to jury trial and due process, in an “attempt to find a substitute for war in settling disputes between nations” (p.205). At the same time, he threatened war; as Gandhi understood a century later, the prospect of violence sets off nonviolence as a dark background does a polished diamond. (Gandhi enjoyed the luxury of brandishing his threat without needing to ready himself to carry it out; he could present himself as the rational alternative to dangerous men.)

Fortunately, none of this worked. The British rejected American protestations and defeated Napoleon, whose victory would have injured American interests far more radically, establishing a Europe united under despotism, closed to free trade. Jefferson stubbornly insisted on the moral equivalence of Napoleon, “the tyrant of the land,” and Great Britain, “the tyrant of the sea” (p.245), effectively tilting American policy against the latter. As would occur more than once in the centuries to come, embargo alone did not work.

It was not to be expected that the British political nation, having steeled itself against the hardships of war for many years, would concede the issue in dispute merely from fear of economic distress. It had endured far worse at the hands of an enemy far more powerful, yet its will had not been broken. . . . (P.223)

Moreover, the embargo “could not have been enforced save by a veritable war against the violation of the embargo at home,” a war for which Jeffersonian America was of course unprepared, given its distaste for military establishment. Had Jefferson “publicly recognized that England was in truth engaged in a contest for public liberty and international order,” he could have compromised on the lesser issue of neutrals’ rights (p.227). Again, this is not so much a failure of “moralism,” as the authors would have it, as a failure to arrive at a reasonable moral judgment given competing moral and political claims.

“Taken to escape the humiliating alternatives of national humiliation or war,

[the embargo] led first to humiliation and ultimately to war”—the War of 1812 fought by the Madison Administration (p.233). Professors Tucker and Hendrickson show that modernity seeks peace through economics but cannot escape the imperative (and the charms) of politics. They are less successful in acknowledging that those imperatives and charms are often moral, not mere effects of force.