

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-02070-2 - Thomas Jefferson and American Nationhood

Brian Steele

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

Jefferson's America

My affections were first for my own country, and then generally for all mankind.
Thomas Jefferson 1811¹

Jefferson's most enduring love affair was with America. Onto it he projected some of his deepest longings, and he drew sustenance from its reciprocal affection. He neglected his family, his farm, and his books for it and at times seemed to abandon cherished principles and to forsake the world itself for its service. He must have been particularly gratified to hear John Adams admit that "the nation was with you," because his "yearning for" its "sympathy," as Henry Adams later suggested, "was almost feminine" and a "loss of popularity was his bitterest trial."² Jefferson long insisted that his principles were "unquestionably the principles of the great body of our fellow citizens," and, in point of fact, Henry Adams noted, "every one admitted that Jefferson's opinions, in one form or another, were shared by a majority of the American people." Jefferson's "visionary qualities seemed also to be a national trait," much to the dismay of the Federalists.³ Jefferson had a palpable sense that his own life would always be bound up with America's, for good or ill – that his own fame and legacy depended to a large extent on America's future greatness. His relationship with America, then, was symbiotic, and his own assertions about America occasionally verged on the autobiographical. His claim to have expressed the sentiments

¹ Thomas Jefferson (hereinafter "TJ") to Thomas Law, January 15, 1811, *PTJ*, *Retirement Series*, 3:298–299.

² John Adams to TJ, May 1, 1812, in *AJL*, 301; Lester J. Cappon, ed., *The Adams-Jefferson Letters: The Complete Correspondence Between Thomas Jefferson and Abigail and John Adams*, (2nd ed., Chapel Hill, 1987); Henry Adams, *History of the United States of America in the Administrations of Thomas Jefferson* (New York, 1986), 100, 1239.

³ To Elbridge Gerry, January 26, 1799, in *TJW*, 1058; Merrill D. Peterson, ed., *Thomas Jefferson: Writings* (New York, 1984); Adams, *History*, 117.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-02070-2 - Thomas Jefferson and American Nationhood

Brian Steele

Excerpt

[More information](#)

of all America in the Declaration of Independence looks very much like a way of saying that he spoke for America or, even more boldly, that America spoke through him. If the “sense of America” really did “approve” of Jefferson’s views, as he once told Washington, he had merely to “acquiesce,” in turn, for the identification to be complete.⁴ In any case, he once told French political economist, Jean Baptiste Say, “I think for America.”⁵ Historians are sometimes frustrated by the tendency of Americans to take Jefferson as a kind of proxy for America, but Jefferson himself was probably the first to do so.⁶ This book explores the story that Jefferson told about America and suggests that this narrative shaped his politics, his statecraft, and, ultimately, his – and our – identification of his own person with the nation. In short, it envisions Jefferson as the author of an American nationalism.

Nearly everything Jefferson did in public life (and much obliquely in private) he justified in the name of the American nation. Yet few historians have explored the centrality of nation as an organizing principle of Jefferson’s thought, politics, and statesmanship.⁷ Jefferson’s nationalism manifested itself in a rhetorical discourse, a political and cultural project, and an evaluative assessment of American identity and experience as the universal ideal toward which all nations would one day aspire.⁸

There is no essential or exclusively authentic Jefferson, and I steer clear of any attempt to unveil one here. What I do suggest is that scrutinizing him through the lens of nationalism envisions some coherence to a career that others have characterized as a bundle of contradictions. Scholars have gleaned important insights by looking carefully at the sources of Jefferson’s ideas. But Jefferson was not the defender of a preexisting Lockean or a classical republican tradition. These are scholarly paradigms – created to serve contemporary historiographical needs – that Jefferson might not have recognized as worth distinguishing in the way scholars have so carefully done.⁹ Jefferson’s thought was no doubt molded by his education and studies but was also crucially forged in the fires of experience and necessity. What if, instead of beginning with Jefferson’s commitment to a tradition of thought, we begin with Jefferson’s assumptions about national identity and try to understand the implications of those assumptions for his politics and statecraft? In other

⁴ See TJ to Washington, September 9, 1792, in *TJW*, 996.

⁵ TJ to Say, February 1, 1804, in *TJW*, 1144.

⁶ See the reflections in Jan Ellen Lewis and Peter S. Onuf, “American Synecdoche: Thomas Jefferson as Image, Icon, Character, Self,” in *AHR*, 103 (February 1998), 125–136.

⁷ The major exception is Peter S. Onuf in *Jefferson's Empire: The Language of American Nationhood* (Charlottesville, 2000) and *The Mind of Thomas Jefferson* (Charlottesville, 2007).

⁸ See Craig Calhoun, *Nationalism* (Minneapolis, 1997), 6.

⁹ See Daniel Rogers, “Republicanism: The Career of a Concept,” in *JAH*, 79 (June 1998), 11–38; Alan Gibson, *Understanding the Founding: The Crucial Questions* (Lawrence, 2007), 130–164.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-02070-2 - Thomas Jefferson and American Nationhood

Brian Steele

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction: Jefferson's America*

3

words, what if we begin with Jefferson's conception of the "good people" whom he believed constituted the American nation in 1776, and with the stories he told about them?¹⁰

Nationhood was never a dispensable element in Jefferson's thought, never merely a means to an end. My emphasis on the significance of nationhood does not exclude the centrality of individual natural rights or federalism in his thought. To the contrary, Jefferson always imagined that when the American nation was truest to its character and purpose, individual rights and the deepest interests of its various communities would be fulfilled. Jefferson rarely had to prioritize rights or federalism over nationhood precisely because his highest universal principles were manifested, in historical time, in a particular nation, the only one on earth explicitly committed to them.

Jefferson's commitments to state, nation, and world overlapped. To the degree that scholars (or partisans) have emphasized one of these to the exclusion of others – Jefferson's Virginia provincialism, for example, over his enlightenment cosmopolitanism; his commitment to states' rights over his expansion of national power; his lifelong effort to enlarge the capabilities of individuals over his sense that such individuals were fully liberated only as members of something larger than the self – they have missed something crucial about the complexity of his thought.

Jefferson came of age – and grew old – among the Virginia gentry, and he remained throughout his long public career in national government a member of the planter class.¹¹ This fact, to be sure, informed his deepest values, but it did not limit (or exhaust) them. Likewise, his membership in the trans-Atlantic "republic of letters" was a fundamental aspect of his self-understanding, but he typically described in capacious or universal language characteristics he believed to be uniquely *American*. *Nationalism*, *cosmopolitanism*, and *provincialism* are not mutually exclusive, but are of necessity bound up with one another. Cosmopolitanism can be assimilated by provincial culture, nationalism is generally experienced locally, and cosmopolitan values can shape provincial perspectives. The tired and generally unexamined assertion that Jefferson meant *Virginia* when he said "my country," for example, is not only empirically false – Jefferson's "country" could mean Virginia, America, or Albemarle County, depending on the context – but is also analytically useless, telling us little about the way Jefferson's deepest values were an inseparable amalgamation of the cosmopolitan, nationalist, and provincial.

In this book, I make two broad suggestions that may appear to be in tension. First, I describe Jefferson as an American nationalist. American historians

¹⁰ See "Original Rough Draught," in *PTJ*, 1:427.

¹¹ For two treatments that emphasize this aspect of Jefferson's public life, see, Herbert E. Sloan, *Principle and Interest: Thomas Jefferson and the Problem of Debt* (New York, 1995) and Ronald L. Hatzenbuehler, "I Tremble for My Country": *Thomas Jefferson and the Virginia Gentry* (Gainesville, FL, 2006).

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-02070-2 - Thomas Jefferson and American Nationhood

Brian Steele

Excerpt

[More information](#)

have been reluctant to do this because they tend to juxtapose Hamilton's fiscal-military state with Jefferson's federalism. Now, to the extent that Jefferson understood the indispensability of a central state (and served in its offices for decades), he was a nationalist in this traditional sense, yes, and one of the aims of this book is, in fact, to recover this aspect of Jefferson's politics.¹² But when we drop the equation of nationalism with attachment to a particular form of the state, and focus instead on the claims Jefferson made about the nation, we can begin to see the multifarious nature of his nationalism.¹³ If nations are the "imagined communities" that Benedict Anderson has suggested, then it might be fruitful to think of nationalism as the process of imagining.¹⁴ And, indeed, Jefferson's imagining is a central subject of this book. If all nationalisms assume a collective homogeneity that renders internal differences superficial and external ones endemic and profound, Jefferson's was no exception.¹⁵ He imagined a national unity deeply rooted in affection and in what he considered a peculiarly American set of characteristics: unified history, general prosperity, republican "spirit," and domestic happiness. Jefferson was, if not the first, then

¹² Also see the important insights in Colin Bonwick, "Jefferson as Nationalist," in Gary L. McDowell, Sharon L. Noble, eds., *Reason and Republicanism: Thomas Jefferson's Legacy of Liberty* (Lanham, MD, 1997), 149–168.

¹³ Nationalism is less an "identification with the *state* than loyalty to the *nation*" (Walker Connor, "A Nation is a Nation, is a State, is an Ethnic Group is a ...," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 1 [October 1978], 383; emphasis added). Among a multitude of studies, I have found particularly helpful two books by Craig Calhoun and two review essays by Lloyd Kramer. See Calhoun, *Nationalism* (Minneapolis, 1997) and *Nations Matter: Culture, History, and the Cosmopolitan Dream* (London and New York, 2007); Kramer, "Historical Narratives and the Meaning of Nationalism," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 58 (1997), 525–545, and "Nations as Texts: Literary Theory and the History of Nationalism," in *The Maryland Historian*, 24 (1993), 71–82. I also gratefully acknowledge my debt to David Potter's classic essay, "The Historian's Use of Nationalism, and Vice Versa," in *AHR*, 67 (July 1962), 924–950, and to Peter Onuf, "Federalism, Republicanism, and the Origins of American Sectionalism," in Peter Onuf, Edward L. Ayers, Patricia Nelson Limerick, and Stephen Nissenbaum, *All Over the Map: Rethinking American Regions* (Baltimore and London, 1996), 11–37; 107–117. Also see the lucid introduction to the literature in Paul Quigley, *Shifting Grounds: Nationalism and the American South, 1848–1865* (New York, 2011), esp. 3–15.

¹⁴ Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London, 2006). Anderson is quick to point out that "imagined" does not mean "imaginary," a nice corrective to an assumption all too common in the literature on the "constructed" nature of nations (6). On the denaturalization of the nation, see Ernest Gellner, *Thought and Change* (Chicago, 1965), 150, 168, and Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge and New York, 1990), especially 1–15. For a brilliant defense of the viability and continued relevance of national history rooted in a vision of nations, not as assumptions to be taken for granted (naturalized), but as the results of historical processes, see Johann Neem, "American History in a Global Age," *History and Theory*, 50 (February 2011), 41–70, esp. 62–68. I also maintain a particular appreciation of David Hollinger, "The Historian's Use of the United States and Vice Versa," in Thomas Bender, ed., *Rethinking American History in a Global Age* (Berkeley, 2002), 381–395; and, from a different but not ultimately incompatible perspective, Louis A. Perez, Jr., "We Are the World: Internationalizing the National, Nationalizing the International," in *JAH*, 89 (September 2002), 558–566.

¹⁵ See Liah Greenfeld, *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity* (Cambridge, MA, 1992), 7.

Introduction: Jefferson's America

5

certainly the most prolific and articulate early exponent of a kind of American exceptionalism.

If my first contention dislodges nation (and nationalism) from an exclusive association with the state, my second turns our attention back to the state, though this time, I hope, with new eyes. Jefferson's conception of the state was both deeply intertwined with his nationalism and more complex and profound than a simple preference for limited government. Many of the most common spurious quotations attributed to Jefferson emphasize his hostility to state power, and many of Jefferson's actual phrases have been decontextualized and used for purposes he would not recognize as his own.¹⁶ Thoreau, not Jefferson, asserted "that government is best which governs least," and Gerald Ford, not Jefferson, first warned Americans (in 1974) that "a government big enough to give you everything you want is a government big enough to take from you everything you have."¹⁷ Misattribution of this sort is understandable because Jefferson did value limits on government power, and he eyed the state with an ambivalence rooted in traditional republican concerns about corruption: "Free government is founded in jealousy, and not in confidence," he wrote.¹⁸ The point here is emphatically not to trade proof texts (we could certainly find genuine Jefferson quotes that approximate the spurious ones and others that undermine them, but that would do little to clarify matters) or to encourage a snide contempt for the public (hardly a Jeffersonian occupation, as we will see). But it is incumbent on the historian to seek to understand words in the context in which they were uttered. Ford's concern, for example, could not have been Jefferson's, precisely, rooted as it was in a critique of a twentieth-century welfare state that Jefferson could never have imagined. Jefferson can be neither a social democrat, a New Deal liberal, or a libertarian (or a Maoist, for that matter),¹⁹ because he lived in a world that was not animated by the specific issues and institutions that gave rise to those later political ideologies. Indeed, one of my intentions is to recover the Jefferson of history from exclusive claims made by any twentieth-century political ideology. Jefferson's fear of consolidation and abuse of power was rooted in his democratic nationalism, and understanding this renders Jefferson's approach to government less sphinx-like and more coherent, if not always perfectly consistent or free from the gyrations of pragmatic flexibility that bewilder the ideologically rigid. What Jefferson feared about consolidation was its threat to disconnect the state from the only thing

¹⁶ See the running list of lines misattributed to Jefferson compiled by the research staff at Monticello: <http://www.monticello.org/site/jefferson/spurious-quotations>, accessed August 13, 2011.

¹⁷ Ford, Address to Joint Session of Congress, August 12, 1974. Text at John T. Woolley and Gerhard Peters, *The American Presidency Project*, Santa Barbara, CA: <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=4694>, accessed June 11, 2010.

¹⁸ Draft of the Kentucky Resolutions, October 1798, in *TJW*, 454.

¹⁹ See Conor Cruise O'Brien, *The Long Affair: Thomas Jefferson and the French Revolution, 1785–1800* (Chicago, 1996), 150; Joseph Ellis, *American Sphinx: The Character of Thomas Jefferson* (New York, 1997), 127.

that could grant it legitimacy, the people. The goal of Jefferson's federalism, which diffused power, then, was, perhaps paradoxically, an intimacy between state and nation rather than an inflexible bulwark against state action.

Because, if "the nation" was, as Jefferson once told George Washington, "the source of authority with us," Jefferson also understood that the will of the nation enabled and required power.²⁰ The state could not rest content with proper ideology; it had an obligation to enact the nation's ends. As he once put it, "governments are republican only in proportion as they embody the will of the people *and* execute it."²¹ Jefferson understood that threats to liberty could come from the state, certainly, and from private concentrations of power as well as distant empires. But the American federal system with its overlapping spheres of authority and separation of powers would limit state violence against citizens while also mobilizing government power for the fulfillment of the nation's purposes. This is why Jefferson could value the Bill of Rights precisely for setting "further guards to liberty without touching the energy of the government."²²

Jefferson understood that the state could become powerful in ways that undermined liberty: He had seen this happen at home and abroad, even though he could never have anticipated all the resources the modern state has at its disposal to monitor and organize the most intimate details of the lives of citizens. But Jefferson's ambivalence became hostility only when the state failed to embody the will of the nation. By the mid-1790s, Jefferson believed that the Federalists were willing to take the power of the state as an end in itself rather than as a facilitator of the nation's purposes. So his political opposition was never about rendering government impotent. His end was always what he believed to be the only proper goal of the republican statesman: alignment of the state with the will of the nation. This commitment to nation offers a fundamental continuity between the politics he pursued in the 1790s and his statecraft as president. Despite the many apparent twists and turns in his career, the Ariadne's thread that follows them all is Jefferson's belief that government submission to what he called the "will of the nation" was sine qua non in a republic.²³ This book explores the ways in which that commitment played out over the various political battles of the era.

Jefferson envisioned a fairly intimate relationship between the state and the people, rooted in a democratic sensibility alien to the possessive individualism embraced by classic descriptions of modern American liberalism.²⁴ Jefferson

²⁰ TJ to George Washington, February 4, 1792, in *PTJ*, 23:100–101.

²¹ TJ to Samuel Kercheval, July 12, 1816, in *TJW*, 1396, emphasis added. For important and compelling reflections on the relationship between executive energy and public approbation in Jefferson's thought, see Jeremy D. Bailey, *Thomas Jefferson and Executive Power* (Cambridge, 2007).

²² TJ to John Paul Jones, March 23, 1789, in *PTJ*, 14:689.

²³ "Notes on the Legitimacy of Government," December 30 1792, in *PTJ*, 24: 802.

²⁴ For recent efforts to render American liberalism historically less individualistic and more democratic, see Adam-Max Tuchinsky, "'The Bourgeoisie Will Fall and Fall Forever': The *New-York*

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-02070-2 - Thomas Jefferson and American Nationhood

Brian Steele

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction: Jefferson's America*

7

never defended a radical individualism or imagined that democracy was possible in the absence of certain social conditions that made it viable. Without economic independence, education and access to information, and maximum popular participation in government, democracy would add up to nothing other than what all political thought to his day said it would: mob rule. In other words, democratic procedure was important to him, but it could never be efficacious in the absence of a substantive democratic culture – a culture that he believed existed uniquely in America.

I make no definitive claims here about American nationality, as distinct from Jefferson's assertions about it. In this sense, then, this study is both less and more than we typically get in studies of Jefferson. This is not a biography of Jefferson, nor is it an exhaustive history of his political thought, his statecraft, or his political career and achievements, much less an exploration of his personal life, though all of these are crucial to its theme. Neither do I tell the story of the nation itself (or even assume its unqualified existence) but, rather, identify and analyze the story Jefferson told about it. In doing so, I claim Jefferson as a progenitor of American nationalism, and I make suggestions about how his conception of the nation shaped his politics and statecraft. My goal is neither to find a definition for the nation nor to insist that Jefferson conforms to some predetermined theory of the nation, though many of those theories inform this work (and in crucial ways make it possible). Rather, I explore the process by which Jefferson himself imagined the nation and developed the claims he made on its behalf.

Because Jefferson believed that the nation was constituted by popular embrace of its existence and purpose, and that no state could be legitimate without embodying the people's will and aspirations, he never imagined that a nation could be understood entirely through a study of its intellectual elite. The people themselves (as several recent studies have demonstrated) created a national identity through their practices of nationhood and citizenship (including, but not limited to, participation in parades and national celebrations, absorption of civic texts, erection of memorials, voting, petitioning, writing, and imagining). Jefferson would be the first to – in fact *was* the first to – describe American nationhood as an embodiment of popular aspirations.²⁵

But Jefferson's "American story" is worth thinking through if only because, like all discourse, it is an "event" in its own right, a "driving force ... of

Tribune, the 1848 French Revolution, and American Social Democratic Discourse," in *JAH*, 92 (September 2005), 470–497; James T. Kloppenberg, *The Virtues of Liberalism* (Oxford, 1998), esp. 21–37; and Kloppenberg, "In Retrospect: Louis Hartz's *The Liberal Tradition in America*," *Reviews in American History* 29.3 (2001), 460–476.

²⁵ Simon P. Newman, *Parades and the Politics of the Street: Festive Culture in the Early American Republic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997); Len Travers, *Celebrating the Fourth: Independence Day and the Rites of Nationalism in the Early Republic* (Amherst, 1997); David Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes: The Making of American Nationalism, 1776–1820* (Chapel Hill, 1997); Francois Furstenberg, *In the Name of the Father: Washington's Legacy, Slavery, and the Making of a Nation* (New York, 2006).

history, and not merely [a] representation.”²⁶ Arguments and assertions, David Hollinger reminds us, “are social acts” and, therefore, legitimate “objects of historical study.”²⁷ If, like all national discourses, Jefferson’s was congratulatory and often self-serving, ignoring, or papering over, the multiple contradictory realities and experiences that failed to align with it (or which might form the basis for an alternate narrative), such was, to some degree, the basis of its popular appeal.²⁸ The significance of Jefferson’s narrative rests, in part, on its historical capacity to persuade large numbers of Americans (including historians), whose assent thereby constituted certain social realities in the early Republic and ultimately shaped the meaning of the nation for many.²⁹

Jefferson also understood, as Thomas Bender put it, that “the nation cannot be its own context” but owes its existence to “a framework larger than itself.”³⁰ From the beginning, Jefferson’s assertions of American sovereignty assumed a “candid world” and a global system of states and national experiences and histories against which to define America’s own. So the international or interstate system defined and legitimized the nation even as it threatened its existence.

Jefferson’s national project was no mere exercise in political theory, and this exploration of his practices of nationalism remains separate from any discussion of whether Jefferson was a successful statesman. The sometimes crooked timbers of Jefferson’s thought cannot be straightened without distorting the historical record. Though I make a case for the essential coherence of Jefferson’s nationalism, I do not suggest that it remained unchanged or consistent throughout his life. We will witness plenty of contradictions and paradoxes – as we might very well expect of any pragmatic nationalism. The historian’s task, it seems to me, is to describe, explain, and interrogate claims, not to force clarity on what is inherently irreconcilable. I hope to describe Jefferson’s thought without necessarily embracing his as an absolutely trustworthy depiction of contemporary events (particularly when it comes to his assessment of Federalist motives and ideals). So, the book is not a defense or exoneration of Jefferson any more than it is an attack on him. Perhaps it should go without saying that what follows is not by any means the “whole truth” about Jefferson – everything we need to know. But if it is one truth

²⁶ Tzvetan Todorov, *On Human Diversity: Nationalism, Racism, and Exoticism in French Thought* (Cambridge, MA, 1993), xiii.

²⁷ David Hollinger, *In the American Province: Studies in the History and Historiography of Ideas* (Bloomington, 1985), x.

²⁸ For explorations of this theme, see Homi K. Bhabha, ed., *Nation and Narration* (New York, 1990), esp. 1–7, and the succinct statement in Jack P. Greene, “Empire and Identity from the Glorious Revolution to the American Revolution,” in P.J. Marshall, ed., *The Oxford History of the British Empire*, 2: *The Eighteenth Century* (Oxford, 1998), 208.

²⁹ Fabián Alejandro Campagne, *Homo Catholicus. Homo Superstitiosus. El discurso antisupersticioso en la España de los siglos XV a XVIII* (Buenos Aires: Miño y Dávila, 2002), 21–25. I am grateful to Andrew Keitt for translating these pages and sharing them with me.

³⁰ Thomas Bender, *A Nation Among Nations: America's Place in World History* (New York, 2006), 7.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-02070-2 - Thomas Jefferson and American Nationhood

Brian Steele

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction: Jefferson's America*

9

about him – and I believe it is – we will need to accommodate the other stories we tell about Jefferson to it.

In the chapters that follow, Jefferson will appear as the historian, the sociologist, the ethnographer, and the political theorist of America, as well as the most successful practitioner of its politics and its most enthusiastic champion. Chapter 1 describes Jefferson's narrative of American nationhood as it first emerged in his revolutionary writing in the 1770s. Jefferson's "American story" assumed and asserted the existence of a people, described the character of that people, and projected this people into nation-time past and future, as well as the obvious present.³¹ I argue that the Declaration of Independence made cultural and historical claims about American character and identity even as it asserted American sovereignty in a world of states, or, rather that these two projects were intimately connected; the political claims could be legitimate, by the Declaration's logic, only if the cultural and historical ones were true. The legitimacy of the statehood project, Jefferson implied, rested on the existence of a people.

The second through fourth chapters explore some of the more complex and particularistic claims Jefferson made about the character of this American people. Chapter 2 explores Jefferson's description of American domestic life as a universal standard achieved fully only in the United States. Chapter 3 follows out this analysis by unpacking Jefferson's further elaboration of the American "spirit" and character that he believed made democratic politics possible in the United States and rendered European political theory inapplicable to its experience.³² Chapter 4 examines the intimate relationship Jefferson envisioned between the public and the state, between citizens and republican leadership, a relationship that rendered Americans remarkably free but that also, somewhat paradoxically, sharply circumscribed the boundaries of the public. In this chapter, I also suggest that the democratic Jefferson we celebrate today is inseparable from the Jefferson who temporized on slavery, excluded African Americans from the national public, and included Indians on only the most rigidly assimilationist terms. Jefferson's nation, like all nations, gained coherence from its "others," abroad and at home, so that the same nationalism that welcomed participation among citizens also found it imperative to close off paths to citizenship for those not easily assimilated.

Chapter 5 explores the ramifications of all of these claims and assumptions about America for Jefferson's politics, or, rather, it suggests that Jefferson's politics in the 1790s might best be understood in light of his nationalism. Federalists, Jefferson came to believe, did not share his understanding of the ways in which the American experience had created a public uniquely suited

³¹ See Stefan Berger, "The Power of National Pasts: Writing National History in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Europe," in Berger, ed., *Writing the Nation: A Global Perspective* (New York, 2007), 36.

³² On national character as causally sufficient explanation for behavior, see Joep Leerssen, "The Rhetoric of National Character: A Programmatic Survey," *Poetics Today*, 21 (Summer 2000), 267–292, esp. 272.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-02070-2 - Thomas Jefferson and American Nationhood

Brian Steele

Excerpt

[More information](#)

for democratic politics or the ways in which this experience could be indefinitely reinforced by a close connection between the public and the state. Eventually, he came to read the Federalist agenda as a counterrevolutionary and ultimately un-American effort to administer the national state according to its own rationale, disconnected except in the most superficial of ways to the will of the nation. His political opposition, I argue, was, at heart, a project designed to realign the state with the only thing that rendered it legitimate: the nation. Reading Jefferson's political project through the lens of nationhood, I suggest here, might contribute to new insights into his presidency, rendering his expansion of executive authority and aggressive uses of national power less a contradiction than a fulfillment of his opposition in the 1790s. Chapter 6 reads the Kentucky Resolutions as an episode in this larger project of reconnecting state and nation, reflects on the problem of coercion in his theory of union, and considers the inextricability of Jefferson's federalism from his nationalism.

While the body of the book strives to describe Jefferson's program as historically specific, unassimilable precisely to any of our own political ideologies, the Epilogue faces the reality that Jefferson always slips the bounds of historicism because he remains an icon of our public culture. What I hope to suggest here is that the continuing national project of renewing civic life and national purpose operates largely in the broad terms Jefferson laid out for the continuation of the national community. Insofar as the nation continues to link itself with that tradition, it remains Jefferson's America, even as its scale, scope, and structure have been transformed out of all recognition from the America Jefferson himself knew. Jefferson may have felt little sense of debt or obligation to the past, because he believed his generation had made the world anew. But he remained concerned that future generations maintain a sense of connection with that revolutionary and constitutive moment. Whenever we reverence the "founders," Jefferson included, as "our" ancestors, we are in some fundamental sense affirming Jefferson's original vision of a national community moving through time. In a sense, then, the Epilogue concedes the defeat of history by tradition and collective memory. And this takes us back to the founders' conception of history as a moral exercise rather than an effort to simply reconstruct the past as it really was.

Reading Jefferson as an American nationalist, then, may offer a way of envisioning him anew, of questioning our shibboleths not only about him but also about ourselves. The world may not need another book about Thomas Jefferson, but I hope that this one at least suggests that wrestling with Jefferson remains a fruitful exercise for both the scholar and the citizen.