

Peter S. Onuf, *Jefferson's Empire: The Language of American Nationhood* (Charlottesville, Virginia: University Press of Virginia, 2000); xi + 250 pp., ISBN: 0-8139-1930-4; \$24.95 cloth.

Peter S. Onuf opens his book by stating that 'Thomas Jefferson cherished an imperial vision for the new American nation.' To understand this position it is important to note that the word 'empire' did not carry the pejorative connotation which it does today. Jefferson did not envision an empire like the British, but rather an empire of endless republics. He viewed his creation optimistically, as being destined to serve mankind. The author poses the question as to whether Jefferson was aware of what his empire would become, and was its destiny manifest? Defining the terms of empire and nation as far as Jefferson used them are two of the major themes to be addressed. Onuf admits to being 'deeply conflicted' in his consideration of Jefferson, making note (as most authors do) of his best-known inconsistencies – his ownership of slaves and his liaisons with Sally Hemmings – which occurred despite his own warnings against miscegenation in *Notes on the State of Virginia*. But it is important to define Jefferson, because in doing so we define the United States, the two being almost impossible to distinguish from each other.

The American Revolution was the central event for Jefferson, and he measured everything against it. Whenever a crisis arose, it was always to the first principles of the revolution that he returned. In his Americanism, we see further paradox in this man of paradox. He is at once European and American. He is European in his Enlightenment sensibilities and even his patriotism is directed towards a European audience, his *Notes on the State of Virginia* being addressed to European elite. Jefferson is not the isolationist some would

portray him as being; rather, he invented an American people to be an equal to the nations of Europe. His was to be a republican empire, based on a rejection of monarchy. Everything about it would be defined in terms of its opposition to monarchy, while his enemies, such as Alexander Hamilton, would be categorized as monarchists. This federal union, what he referred to in his correspondence with Joseph Priestly as a 'new thing under the sun,' was both liberal and classical in nature. It was a hierarchy which extended from local wards to a union of republics with equality at all levels. Jefferson did not reject empire, just the British version of empire, in which the metropolitan center dominated and trampled on the rights of the periphery.

Jeffersonian Republicanism tends to bring to mind terms such as slavery and states rights. Jefferson did disapprove of putting limitations on Missouri's right to decide its own status concerning slavery, something which is usually seen by detractors as just one more example of his hypocrisy. But it can also be argued that this position was consistent with his overall views on republican government. Onuf contends that Jefferson's strict construction was not just a 'fetish' but a guarantee of liberty under his conception of the republic. His position on Missouri was therefore not contradictory; rather, it sought to preempt control by a metropolis. The elements of his republic were drawn together by harmonious interests. Jefferson's nationalism grew out of a devotion to a union of these interests. Popular sovereignty had been the great invention of the Revolution. Jefferson's nation was defined by its enemies, both domestic and foreign. He conjured up revolutionary imagery in his 1800 victory, as he usually did when confronting his enemies. He did see black slaves as a people deserving of equality, and he noted the demoralizing effect of slavery on slave-owners. He saw the ultimate solution as expatriation and colonization of ex-slaves. Indians could also not be overlooked, but he saw them as a threat during the revolution, and believed they must either accept the gifts of civilization or perish. Jefferson's union was destroyed by the Civil War, but his legacy endures in the American psyche.

Jefferson's views on Indians strike us as just as paradoxical as most of his views. He seems to hold them up as true exemplars of natural republicanism, uncorrupted by civilization, and yet at the same time as the embodiment of savagery: the noble savage representing the innocence of his own childhood, the savage providing the pretext for imperial expansion. But as with most of his views, a closer examination of Jefferson's rationale reveals the logic of his position, though we may see its flaws today. He did respect the Indians and their way of life, noting many of their virtues. He believed that they possessed a moral sense equal to Europeans and also believed in their capacity for civilization. The lack of governmental control among Indians did not result in chaos and strife, but rather in relative peace and freedom. They also possessed a level of valor which surpassed that of Europeans. The fatal flaw that Jefferson saw among Indians was their unequal treatment of women and the use of force against them. By not respecting equality in their own homes, using the labor of women to indulge their warrior-hunter lifestyles, they were cut off from the effects of civil society, making them susceptible to corruption. And they had been corrupted by European influence, which had degraded their culture since initial contact. It was this corruption that Jefferson railed against in the Declaration of Independence. But the author makes the point that the intent was not to paint Indians as savages, but to blame George III for causing them to be that way.

An understanding of westward expansion and the appropriation of Indian lands is intrinsic to an understanding of the Revolution. As Jefferson saw it, the original land grant to Virginians conferred rights which established the colonists as a people with inalienable rights to the land. For Virginians, usurpation of these rights by subsequent monarchs was one of the justifications for revolution. In their 1776 constitution, they asserted their rights to the lands granted by the original charter, which included the lands of the Ohio. After the Revolution, Virginians were quite adamant in claiming these rights, carefully making the distinction that they were exercising the choice to cede these lands to the new confederation, rather than that the new federal government was exercising its power to appropriate them. This was a vital point for Jeffersonians, who did not want the development of the west to be controlled from a corrupt central metropolis similar to London. They insisted that new territories be incorporated from the start as states with powers and rights equal to those of the existing states. This was necessary to bring about Jefferson's 'fee simple empire.' To insure this, they would have to have control of their lands, including dealings with Indians.

Jeffersonians subscribed to the notion of the right of conquest in dealing with the Indian tribes. Since the Indians were the defeated allies of the British, they were conquered peoples whose lands could be appropriated without prior consent. Republicans opposed the Federalist re-institution of the policy of negotiating treaties with the Indians, fearing it would only benefit land speculators. Ironically, as president, Jefferson could afford to ignore the Indians as a result of the success of these treaties. Jefferson saw the demise of the Indians as a demographic certainty, with their only hope being the adoption of agriculture. As a people with the same innate capacities as White Americans, their failure to do so was their own fault.

With the Revolution, Americans were not rejecting empire, only its British version. Jefferson's arguments boiled down to the assertion that with the establishment of the colonies, a federal union had already been established. The justification for revolt lay in the failure of the crown and the British people to insure the equal rights of the colonists, allowing them instead to be usurped by a corrupt metropolitan center intent on milking the colonies. With the Declaration of Independence, a union of republics was already created. Montesquieu in *Spirit of the Laws* had doubted the ability of expansive republics to survive, believing that only those republics limited in size were viable. Jefferson rejected this conclusion. The flaw in the British Empire had been its inequality and use of coercion, not its size. He envisioned an empire of an unlimited number of republics predicated on reciprocity of rights and mutual security. Rather than a blow against empire, therefore, the Revolution vindicated it. This put him at odds with the Federalists who saw size as being the flaw of empire, and who viewed the compact nation-state of post-revolutionary Britain as an ideal model. In the light of this rationale, they viewed the Louisiana Purchase as a disaster and empire as an anachronism.

Equality among the republics was the key to Jefferson's vision. The greatest threat was the development of a metropolitan center which could usurp the rights of the periphery. Enemies of his vision were portrayed as foreign, including those of his own countrymen who were enmeshed in trade relations with the British metropolitan core. Such was the basis for his animosity towards cities. Jefferson's agrarianism grew out his republican

model, rather than vice-versa. The development of the interior would facilitate a reduction of the importance of seaports, which were unduly under the sway of London. In order to insure the rights of the periphery, his draft of the Northwest Ordinance was predicated on the creation of new states in every way equal to the old ones, ensuring that union would be consensual and obviating the need for central force. This view of commerce was in some ways flawed. By creating agricultural surpluses, it would make the United States more dependent on European markets, while Jefferson's notion of allowing workshops to remain in Europe would leave them dependent on European manufactured goods.

The election of 1800 is often referred to as the second American Revolution. Portraying his Federalist opponents as foreign was central to Jefferson's campaign against them. The Republicans viewed the 1790s as a counter-revolution. Through instruments such as the National Bank, the Federalists had made the United States overly dependent on Great Britain, putting Britain in a position to buy what it could not win by war. The American people, who should have been the defenders of the Revolution, had not fully grasped its importance and were too easily duped by the Federalists. It was a very bleak decade for Republicans. The darkest hours came with the XYZ affair and Francophobia, which almost led the United States into war with France. Fortunately, France became more willing to resort to diplomacy and the focus of popular anger shifted from France to the Alien and Sedition Acts. Madison had doubted the practical value of the Bill of Rights, but Jefferson's faith was vindicated. Encouraged by the Kentucky and Virginia Resolutions against the Acts, the people threw the Federalists out office and installed Republicans in both the executive and legislative branches. Only the judicial branch, with Federalist Chief Justice John Marshall, was spared, reinforcing Jefferson's misgivings about not making the Supreme Court elective. Jefferson was especially pleased that this new revolution was achieved without civil disorder and force. In his inauguration he took a stance in favor of libertarian tolerance, believing that states rights would promote national patriotism.

During his retirement, there were two events which tested Jefferson's vision of an empire of republics: the Hartford Convention and the Missouri Compromise. The former made him optimistic about the nation's future, the latter pessimistic. The Hartford Convention was a gathering of New England Federalists who wished to conclude peace, even a separate one, with the British during the War of 1812. The subsequent peace settlement and public disapprobation for the Federalists left Jefferson confident in the belief that the rest of the union would have risen up against Massachusetts and Connecticut to preserve the United States. He could approve, even relish, attacks by the Federal government on these states by again painting them as foreign. By seeing them as anti-republican, he made them alien and was therefore not troubled by trammeling on their states rights. The Missouri compromise, however, was a conflict which he likened to a 'firebell in the night.' The crux of his position in the 1784 draft for the Northwest Ordinance had been the admission of new states as equal republics. Any prior restrictions by the Federal government on the terms for admission of the new states made them unequal partners in the federation, and therefore threatened the union as a whole, which was based on equality. He saw northern opposition to slavery as mere hypocrisy, a Federalist attempt to corrupt the union. He saw the Missouri crisis as a harbinger of the disintegration of the union, no longer believing the Federalists would come to their senses. It is appropriate that Jefferson would

be the prophet of Civil War as his Kentucky and Virginia Resolutions, which claimed for the states the right to nullify Federal legislation, along with Jefferson's notion of the Revolution of 1776, were models for southern succession forty years later.

Onuf's book concludes with an attempt to summarize Jefferson's views on blacks and slavery as part of an effort to formulate a coherent theory which would at the same time explain the man who wrote in the *Notes on the State of Virginia* that 'I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just,' but who would also oppose the Missouri Compromise banning slavery in new western states. Jefferson saw the slaves as a captive nation without a country, which put them in a natural state of war with whites, a state of war originally caused by the British because they allowed slavery. In this struggle, whites had to place self-preservation ahead of justice. Emancipation would not end this war. His ultimate solution was 'colonization,' repatriation back to Africa, or perhaps the Caribbean. It was British despotism which had resulted in this captive nation, the exact opposite of the Anglo-Saxon settlers, and its 'liberation' was a natural consequence of the Revolution. The keeping of these slaves made it impossible fully to enjoy the virtues of the yeoman farmer. At first he thought the slave-owners should bear the burden of repatriation. He later felt that this burden should be born by all the states. He never gave up his view on colonization. Although he was willing to doubt his own judgement that blacks were inferior to whites, he could never see them as becoming equal citizens in his republic. They were a foreign nation, forced to American shores, whose resentment would never subside, leaving them perpetually at war with whites.

What I find most satisfying about this book is Peter Onuf's attempt to formulate or identify a unified and coherent system underlying Jefferson's policies. Other studies which analyze various influences on Jefferson are illuminating, but fall short for a number of reasons. Jefferson was exceedingly eclectic in his sources and scholars still are not in agreement on their relative significance. And Jefferson possessed a bold intellect, capable of synthesizing these diverse sources into his own unique policy. Onuf provides us with a plausible line of reasoning, albeit one to which few would subscribe today, to explain much of Jefferson's seeming hypocrisy. It is based on an interesting collation of citations from Jefferson's voluminous writings. The research in both primary and secondary sources is quite extensive for a work of this length, and helps make *Jefferson's Empire* a valuable contribution to our understanding of Thomas Jefferson.