

LETTER

Thomas Jefferson (1743–1826)

to William Duane (1760–1835), Editor of the Philadelphia *Aurora*

Monticello, 4 August 1812

Your favor of the 17th ultimo came duly to hand, and I have to thank you for the military manuals you were so kind as to send me. This is the sort of book most needed in our country, where even the elements of tactics are unknown. The young have never seen service and the old are past it, and of those among them who are not superannuated themselves, their science is become so.

I see, as you do, the difficulties and defects we have to encounter in war, and should expect disasters if we had an enemy on land capable of inflicting them. But the weakness of our enemy there will make our first errors innocent, and the seeds of genius which nature sows with even hand through every age and country, and which need only soil and season to germinate, will develop themselves among our military men. Some of them will become prominent and, seconded by the native energy of our citizens, will soon, I hope, to our force add the benefits of skill.

The acquisition of Canada this year, as far as the neighborhood of Quebec, will be a mere matter of marching, and will give us experience for the attack of Halifax the next, and the final expulsion of England from the American continent. Halifax once taken, every cock-boat of hers must return to England for repairs. Their fleet will annihilate our public force on the water, but our privateers will eat out the vitals of their commerce.

Perhaps they will burn New York or Boston. If they do, we must burn the city of London, not by expensive fleets or Congreve rockets, but by employing an hundred or two Jack-the-painters,¹ whom nakedness, famine, desperation, and hardened vice will abundantly furnish from among themselves.

We have a rumor now afloat that the orders-in-council are repealed. The thing is impossible after Castlereagh's late declaration in Parliament,² and the reconstruction of a Perceval ministry.³ I consider this last circumstance fortunate for us. The repeal of the orders-in-council would only add recruits to our minority and enable them the more to embarrass our march to thorough redress of our past wrongs and permanent security for the future. This we shall attain if no internal obstacles are raised up.

The exclusion of their commerce from the United States and the closing of the Baltic against it, which the present campaign in Europe will effect, will accomplish the catastrophe already so far advanced on them. I think your anticipations of the effects of this are entirely probable—their arts, their science, and what they have left of virtue will come over to us; and although their vices will come also, these, I think, will soon be diluted and evaporated in a country of plain honesty. Experience will soon teach the new-comers how much more plentiful and pleasant is the subsistence gained by wholesome labor and fair dealing than a precarious and hazardous dependence on the enterprises of vice and violence.

Still, I agree with you that these immigrations will give strength to English partialities, to eradicate which is one of the most consoling expectations from the war. But probably the old hive will be broken up by a revolution, and a regeneration of its principles render intercourse with it no longer contaminating. A republic there like ours, and a reduction of their naval power within the limits of their annual facilities of payment, might render their existence even interesting to us. It is the construction of their government, and its principles and means of

¹ During the American Revolution, the Scotsman James Aitken attempted to burn the British naval yards at Portsmouth (England). He came to be known popularly as Jack the Painter.

² Viscount Castlereagh, British Foreign Secretary (1812–1822), had recently told Parliament that a partial repeal of Napoleon's Continental System "made no manner of alteration" to the British orders-in-council.

³ A disgruntled merchant assassinated Spencer Perceval, the Prime Minister, in May 1812. The Earl of Liverpool became Prime Minister, and largely retained the Perceval's cabinet.

corruption, which make its continuance inconsistent with the safety of other nations. A change in its form might make it an honest one, and justify a confidence in its faith and friendship.

That regeneration, however, will take a longer time than I have to live. I shall leave it to be enjoyed among you, and make my exit with a bow to it, as the most flagitious of governments I leave among men. I sincerely wish you may live to see the prodigy of its renovation, enjoying in the meantime health and prosperity.

Paul Ford, ed. *The Works of Thomas Jefferson* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1905), XI:265.