

# Standing Armies and Civil Society: Jefferson's Critique of the Military and Fraternalism<sup>1</sup>

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The question I have been asked to answer is why did Jefferson argue that Masonry was incompatible with a healthy democracy? Well, he didn't actually fear Freemasonry or fraternalism, as much as he practiced a kind of principled apathy toward them, objecting to or shrugging off any practice, association, or institution that concentrated either governmental power or the political power to unduly influence public opinion. Even as a guest here, I hope to convince you today that he had decent reasons for doing so.

In the years following the American Revolution, Jefferson, one of the few leading gentlemen who did not actually serve in the military during the war, became increasingly suspicious of two political tendencies he had reason to believe were inherently connected: one, the concentration of governmental power in a centralized government, and two, the de facto establishment of a professional body of soldiers superseding state and county militia. Sub-state, by which I mean non-

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governmental, organizations that cultivated or reinforced the perceived necessity of these transformations provoked Jefferson's ire because they redirected public attention away from exercising their responsibilities as participatory citizens in a republic. In point of fact, Jefferson displayed a deep ambivalence about voluntary or non-governmental organizations in general, including corporations, precisely because they were not political enough, which is to say that they were not political institutions that guaranteed the participation of the citizenry in public affairs.

Now, it is certainly true that much of Jefferson's passionate defense of state's rights and decentralized political authority has to be seen in the context of his implicit defense of the slaveholder's republic in which he thought and lived. It is also true that much of Jefferson's animosity to the political culture of High Federalism during the Washington Administration came out of his own political ambitions, and his insecurity over not only not serving in the military, but having fled a British incursion as the governor of Virginia, an action for which he was widely condemned.<sup>2</sup> But I want to suggest that if we look at Jefferson's thought in the context of the preceding centuries of constitutional strife in England and throughout the British Empire, we can come to an understanding of the conceptual world in which Jefferson might have seen the Society of the Cincinnati and similar organizations as antithetical to democracy. As I have said, this conceptual world

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<sup>2</sup> See Michael Kranish, *Flight from Monticello: Jefferson at War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010)

was characterized by concerns for the permanence of a mobilized, professional army and its effect on executive power, policy, and public deliberation, as well as fears of a wider political culture that accepted a language of force, authority, order, and necessity as inextricably part of good governance.

According to a line of political analysis that had been potent in England and its North American colonies at least since the early seventeenth century, a standing or permanently mobilized and professional army was antithetical to the liberty of a free state. For the members of Parliament who authored the Petition of Right in 1628 as a rebuke of Charles I, as well as for republican political theorists like James Harrington and John Milton, a standing army was a threat to the liberties of the citizens because it was under the command of the King.<sup>3</sup> As such, it was a potential tool of seizing power, or implying the threat of force against political enemies or counterbalancing institutions of the government. Much more threatening, however, was the perceived inevitability of corruption that would follow from the constant appropriation of funds necessary to keep up a standing army. Such expenditure often required debt, which implicated both the army and the legislative body funding it in private interests. Corruption was first and foremost the overriding of the commonweal or public realm with forces whose primary interest was in profit. It was this point of view that informed much of the

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<sup>3</sup> See J.G.A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975)

English Civil War and not a little of the American Revolution nearly a century and half later. And lest we think these concerns are those of a bygone age, we only need think of President Eisenhower's warning of the "undue influence" accruing in what he called the "military-industrial complex," to assure ourselves that these problems have not in fact gone away.

In place of a standing army, republican thinkers assumed the sufficiency of a militia or popular army consisting of independent male citizens possessed of the virtue to fly to the defense of the realm when necessary. This vision was the inspiration behind the 2<sup>nd</sup> Amendment to the Constitution of the United States.<sup>4</sup> What the amendment communicated to a skeptical public was that the new federal government would not be taking onto itself the sole power over arms, that the individual and independent arms-bearing citizen and his responsibilities in the militia would not disappear upon ratification. The President would be the commander in chief of the armed forces only when they were called into being by the declaration of a state of war by Congress. The assumption here was not simply the right to own a gun, but the duty to own one in the case of the calling up of the militia. In turn, there would be no permanently organized army in the hands of the state. Republicanism of this sort assumed a much closer relationship between the state and wider society, an arrangement that guaranteed sets of powers to local

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<sup>4</sup> See Saul Cornell, *A Well-Regulated Militia: The Founding Fathers and the Origins of Gun Control in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006)

institutions and practices so as to prevent the development of a sphere of policy making beyond the watchful eyes of a necessarily engaged citizenry.

Jefferson took many of these ideas very seriously. During the summer of 1776, when he served as the principal author of the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson's attentions were at least as much fixed on the coming state constitutional convention in Virginia. His draft of a constitution, which was not adopted, denounced the monarchy as an office that had proved time and time again to be "inimical to public liberty," and went on to guarantee the right to possess arms on one's own property and ban of the establishment of a standing army.<sup>5</sup> As Secretary of State in Washington's cabinet, Jefferson would on more than one occasion employ the language of republican fears of corruption as a response to what he saw as the monarchical status attached to the office of the presidency, and the consolidation of a fiscal-military state according to the economic vision of Alexander Hamilton. And it was this conceptual world that shaped the lens through which Jefferson saw the politics of the Order of the Cincinnati.

Jefferson thought that the intentions of those who instituted the order were innocent enough. In 1784, Jefferson wrote to Washington warning him of the political dangers of such a society being established and organized by leading men of the day, and indeed, pamphlet wars had already broken out between opponents

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<sup>5</sup> Jefferson, "Draft Constitution for Virginia," June 1776, *Writings*, pp. 336-345

and supporters of the society.<sup>6</sup> All the same, Jefferson was not about to tell Washington off, and he considered the motivating spirit behind the organization a benign one. “When,” he wrote in 1786, “on the close of that war which established the independence of America, its army was about to be disbanded, the officers, who during the course of it had gone thro the most trying scenes together, who mutual aids and good offices had become dear to one another, felt with great oppression of mind the approach of that moment which was to separate them never perhaps to meet again.”

Jefferson was deeply appreciative of the moment of fraternity that had characterized the experience of serving together in war. A keen student of the significance of the Scottish Enlightenment project of cultivating a civic moral sense, and providing an educational and political environment for the maintenance of that sense over time, Jefferson clearly had sympathy for the fragility of such intense experience in the memory of even the most active participants. General Washington, Jefferson suggested, “was at that moment oppressed with the operation of disbanding an army which was not paid,” and at the same time was present when his officers were discussing the formation of the order. “Far from thinking it a moment to multiply the causes of irritation, by thwarting a proposition

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<sup>6</sup> Jefferson to Washington, 16 April 1784, *Writings*, pp. 790-793; on the Society, see Minor Myers, *Liberty without Anarchy: A History of the Society of the Cincinnati* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1983)

which had absolutely no other basis but of benevolence and friendship,”

Washington, Jefferson recorded, “was rather satisfied to find himself aided in his difficulties by this new incident, which occupied, and at the same time soothed the minds of the officers. He thought too,” Jefferson wrote of Washington, “that this institution would be one instrument the more for strengthening the federal bond and promoting the federal union.”

The risk for Jefferson was that this would turn out not to be the case, that it set up an internal, hierarchical gradation of authority within the order, reinforced a distinction between civilian and military, was not free and open in terms of its membership, and as such would rile up what was for Jefferson understandable if inflated fear and even rage in the public imagination, bringing about a steady and rational opposition, made of mostly working people, who, according to Jefferson, would “see in everything only the dangers with which it threatens civil society.”<sup>7</sup>

That was in 1786, one year before the convention that would establish the US Constitution, nearly three years before Washington would be sworn in as the first President of the United States, with Jefferson as his Secretary of State. Within a few years, Jefferson’s willingness to forgive the sentiments behind the order would disappear. In response to Alexander Hamilton’s economic program, which among other things forced what remnants there were of a barter and subsistence

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<sup>7</sup> Jefferson, “Answers to Demeunier’s Queries,” *Writings*, pp. 582-588

economy in rural areas to convert to exchanges in currency through an excise, and guaranteed the payment of war bonds at face value,<sup>8</sup> what we now call the Whiskey Rebellion broke out in rural New England. Washington called the national army back into being for the sole purpose of crushing the rebellion, which it did.

Jefferson was famously opposed to Hamilton already, but the federal response to populist discontent set off sparks for him precisely because of the conceptual framework I have been attempting to sketch here: the undermining of a republic of independent landholders through the state encouragement of private industry and economic modernization, and the corresponding use of an increasingly present and constant professional soldiery to reinforce that project at home and in Hamilton's view, if need be, abroad.

In response to the Whiskey Rebellion, farmers and artisans set up what they called Democratic-Republican societies to voice opposition to the policies of the Washington Administration. Washington, in turn, denounced these "self-creating societies" as not only dangerous but illegal. In light of the restrictive fraternalism of the Order of the Cincinnati and similar organizations, this struck Jefferson as two things: basely hypocritical, which it was, and a spectacular political

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<sup>8</sup> This was a problem because many poor people and enlisted men had been paid in bonds which were at the time basically worthless, so the owners sold the bonds for cheap to speculators, who in the wake of postwar inflation and economic growth were able to cash in on the bonds.

opportunity for him, and it was that, too. “The denunciation of the democratic societies,” Jefferson wrote to James Madison, “is one of the extraordinary acts of boldness which we have seen” from the Federalists, for it was astonishing that the President should have permitted himself “to be the organ of such an attack on the freedom of discussion, the freedom of writing, printing, and publishing.” What, Jefferson asked, could be the comparison between the democratic societies, “whose avowed object is the nourishment of the republican principles of our constitution, and the society of Cincinnati, a self-created one, carving out for itself hereditary distinctions, lowering over our Constitution eternally, meeting together in all parts of the Union with closed doors, accumulating a capital in their separate treasury, corresponding secretly and regularly and of which society the very persons denouncing the democrats are themselves the fathers, founders, and high officers.”<sup>9</sup>

If the freedom of association was a fundamental right, and indeed, a substantial part of life in civil society, than how could it be that democratic opposition societies were shunned by those who “confine that freedom to the few” in similarly non-governmental organizations? Jefferson went on to sympathize with the Whiskey Rebellion and condemn the use of it by the Administration to stir up public fear. He would evoke similar arguments and employ similar rhetoric in

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<sup>9</sup> Jefferson to Madison, 28 December 1794, *Writings*, pp. 1015-1017

response to the Alien and Sedition Acts in 1798, which were also aimed in large part at opposition press and the democratic societies.

We should now have a pretty good picture as to why Jefferson not only grew increasingly hostile to the Cincinnati, but why he repeatedly declined to take up invitations to be a Freemason and join or recognize similar groups. Many of his fellow Virginians were prominent Masons, and Jefferson served with Benjamin Franklin in France while Franklin was involved with the Lodge of the Nine Sisters in Paris. During his own successful run for the presidency, Jefferson was viciously attacked as an atheist, a Francophile, and a member of the Bavarian Illuminati. In terms of electioneering and political attack, Jefferson gave as good as he got, or at least proved very adept at getting others to give as good as he got, but it is interesting to note Jefferson's response to this situation. In a letter to a friend, he recounted what he knew of the widespread fears of an Illuminati conspiracy having influenced Freemasonry especially, on both sides of the Atlantic. Even if these fears had some validity, Jefferson reasoned, such facts alone were harmless. The fears of Masons and non-Masons alike articulated against the Illuminati, or even the idea of them, were grounded in "real fears that the craft would be endangered by the spreading of information, reason, and natural morality among men." If Johann Adam Weishaupt, the reputed founder of the Illuminati, had written in America, Jefferson boasted, there would have been no need to develop an elaborate

system of secrecy, ritual and belief for what amounted to a pretty basic ethical vision, one that on its face was hardly controversial.<sup>10</sup> In a very serious way, Jefferson just didn't see anything in any of these groups worth getting too excited about.

For Jefferson, we might say, the freedom of association was fundamental, but it was not sufficient. Politics, law, and government needed to provide the conditions and spaces for healthy democracy, and the idea that this responsibility should fall to private associations would have struck him as an atrocious forgetting of what a republic was all about. He treated Christianity, Freemasonry, the Illuminati fears, and the Cincinnati under the same rubric: do they cultivate or harm a healthy and robust collective, civic ethos?

In the final analysis, Jefferson's reduction of belief, faith, and tradition to a matter of opinion, to be evaluated not for its truth content per se but its impact on human behavior, could best be summed up by the memorable phrase of the American philosopher Richard Rorty: "take care of freedom and truth will take care of itself."<sup>11</sup> As I have tried to show here, Jefferson's criticism, amounting to what could frankly be called a principled apathy, came out of a profoundly and

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<sup>10</sup> Jefferson to Bishop James Madison, 31 January 1800, *Writings*, pp. 1076-1078; on the idea of the Illuminati conspiracy in the early republican period, see Bryan Waterman, "The Bavarian Illuminati, the Early American Novel, and Histories of the Public Sphere," *The William and Mary Quarterly* Vol. 62, No. 1 (Jan., 2005), pp. 9-30

<sup>11</sup> See the book of the same title: *Take Care of Freedom and Truth Will Take Care of Itself: Interviews with Richard Rorty*, Eduardo Mendieta, ed. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005)

widely understood body of concepts that feared the subduing of the public realm by private interests or affairs. Such dangers included the relocation of the citizen's primary attention from the public to the private realm, and the decay in the capacities and willingness of citizens to attach themselves in a committed and active way to the actual polities of which they were members. These concerns were not merely theoretical, nor are they irrelevant today.