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Reviewed work(s):

Source: *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Third Series, Vol. 5, No. 4 (Oct., 1948), pp. 467-491

Published by: [Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1920636>

Accessed: 05/07/2012 11:02

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THE PROVIDENTIAL DETECTION

Courtesy of the Ridgway Library, Philadelphia

Anonymous cartoon, showing the American Eagle, symbolizing patriotism, preventing Jefferson from sacrificing the "Constitution & Independence" of America on the "Altar of Gallic Despotism." The "Eye of God" and the letter to Mazzei, which drops from Jefferson's hand, indicate that his un-American principles have been finally unmasked, while the writings that feed the fire on the altar—Rousseau's, Paine's, Godwin's, Volney's, Helvetius'—show his principles to be French and atheistic. The print appeared c. 1800.

Jefferson and the Election of 1800: A Case Study in the Political Smear

Charles O. Lerche, Jr.*

I.

NO cliché is more firmly embedded in the American consciousness than that which insists "politics is a dirty business." Like so many trite expressions, it contains more than a partial truth. Politics in the United States *is* a dirty business, and anyone who takes a hand in the game must be prepared to have his character blackened, his motives questioned, and his private life opened to hostile scrutiny.

Although a standard technique regularly used by the "opposition" at all levels of government, personal assault and defamation—the "smear"—have been most widely resorted to during the quadrennial struggle for the Presidency. No national election has taken place since 1796 without some attempt being made to damage a candidate's reputation by innuendo, rumor and ridicule, and to make him appear unworthy of office. Some elections have been conducted upon a reasonably high plane with vituperation and personalities playing only a small part; others have been marked by floods of propaganda of the most outrageous sort. The most savage campaigns of the latter variety have been those which preceded one of the radical reversals of national policy which we call "revolutions." Jefferson, Jackson, Lincoln, Cleveland, Wilson, and Franklin Roosevelt have each in his turn been looked upon as a threat to the established order, and in massing to meet the menace, no approach was too unedifying, no assertion too petty, no rumor too palpably false to be neglected.

Why do Americans accept mud slinging as a standard campaign technique? It would require an extensive study of our political psychology to arrive at a definite answer, but two observations may be to the point. Very early in their national life Americans grasped the fact that the reward of public office is power: power to advance one's own interests and to destroy those of one's adversary. Thus politics became partisan and party (if not class) interests became the goal of public policy. This is illustrated by the "revolutions" mentioned above. In the campaigns of 1800, 1828, 1860, 1884,

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1912, and 1932 economic cleavages were sharply brought into focus; our most savagely fought elections, with the highest incidence of personal attack, have been those in which basic economic readjustments were the issue. To that remark a second may be added the American analysis of politics as a form of competitive game. It is a fundamental characteristic of our devotion to sports that emphasis is always upon victory, regardless of how achieved. This elevation of ends is also present in our business ethics. So, too, in politics any method which is deemed effective in terms of winning elections is acceptable as part of the machinery of a political campaign.

II.

In many ways the election of 1800 provides an admirable case study of the use of the smear in Presidential politics. This may be termed the first modern election in American political history. For the first time the narrow patrician-plebian dichotomy in politics was broken, and mass parties on a model familiar to twentieth-century observers were organized. It is apparent that the Federalists' campaign against Jefferson's morality and reputation was a part of their attempt to give their party a mass base. To the slanders against Jefferson the Republicans answered in kind—it is one of the most discouraging aspects of our politics that smears invite counter-smears, with honors as to scurrility and inventiveness about equally divided between radical and conservative propagandists—and the assaults on the virtue and integrity of the candidates in that election have never been surpassed either in their ferocity or in their departure from the truth. The maxim of the rumor mongers, "If you throw enough mud, some is bound to stick," is well illustrated in Jefferson's case. His reputation suffered blows in that campaign from which it has not yet recovered.

At the outset it must be admitted that the assaults on Jefferson's morality and character that found their way into print do not accurately reflect the whole of the smear campaign against him. The chief effectiveness of such a device is its surreptitiousness, and a quick whisper or a meaningfully raised eyebrow is often far more devastating than a whole series of letters to the editor. The more shocking instances of personal spite are thus free from danger of exposure. We may be sure that Jefferson's name was bandied about freely at well-upholstered tea parties and other convivial gatherings during the summer and autumn of 1800, and that the record of the accusations and rumors that has come down to us contains only the

less scurrilous and libellous of the tales. Even so, the devotion of Jefferson's enemies to the task of picturing him as a monster is both amazing and instructive. So avid were they for the smallest opening and so unscrupulous were they in their tactics that Jefferson found it necessary to withdraw to Monticello at the height of the campaign and even to refrain from his usual correspondence, in fear lest his mail be opened.¹

The object of such a campaign is simple: to destroy public confidence in a candidate by all manner of criticism, just or unjust, true or false. The points raised need not have any relevance to the basic question of his fitness for the office; indeed, it often serves the smearer's purpose better for them to be completely beside the point. The techniques are standard propaganda devices: name-calling; identification of the candidate with an unpopular idea or cause; and a persistent misinterpretation of the most innocent words and actions. It is also much better if the object of the attack has certain traits of marked individuality; these can easily be made to look ridiculous. America in 1800 was as unkind to non-conformists as it is in 1948, and Jefferson's refusal to accept the norms of his society set him apart in many ways. His undogmatic religion, his interest in abstract learning, his devotion to the principles of literal democracy, his cultured esthetic sense: these offended the "solid citizen" who took his values from the herd. Hence they furnished ready ammunition for the propagandists, and their blows hit Jefferson often where it hurt the most.

The difficulty of coping with a campaign of slander adds to its annoyance. To reply to each attack in turn is physically impossible; to select certain ones to answer is to dignify them; to ignore all completely is to allow them to circulate unimpeded. Jefferson himself seems to have replied personally to only one of the many false accusations that reached his ears during that fateful campaign. In writing Uriah McGregor of Connecticut on August 13, he referred to the allegation of the Reverend Cotton Mather Smith that

I had obtained my property by fraud and robbery; that in one instance, I had defrauded and robbed a widow and fatherless children of an estate to which I was executor, of ten thousand pounds sterling, . . . and that all this could be proved.²

¹ Henry S. Randall, *The Life of Thomas Jefferson* (Philadelphia, 1871), II, 564, 567.

² T. J. Randolph, ed., *Memoir, Correspondence, Miscellanies, from the Papers of Thomas Jefferson* (Charlottesville, 1829), 439.

Jefferson went on to refute this categorically by insisting that his property was patrimonial and by describing the only two estates of which he had ever been executor. Except for this one instance the task of combatting falsehood and otherwise counteracting the malicious rumors was left to lieutenants and to the many anonymous newspaper correspondents and pamphleteers in the Jeffersonian camp.³

What were the main avenues of attack upon Jefferson in 1800? None of them was new: the Federalists had been venting their spleen upon him ever since 1793 when the cleavage with Hamilton had come to an open break.⁴ First, and perhaps most unfair of all, was the accusation of atheism. This, largely the product of New England divines, runs like a leitmotif through nearly all the anti-Jefferson literature. Second in importance was the charge of being an "impractical" dreamer and philosopher, thus unfitted for responsible office. Third, the story of the "Mazzei letter"⁵ was retold and expanded into a broad charge of disrespect to Washington. Fourth, Jefferson's attachment to democracy in general and to the French Revolution in particular resulted in his being pictured as a revolutionary wrecker of the most violent type, determined to make the country over after the fashion of the French. An offshoot of this was the accusation that he was planning to make himself another Bonaparte. In addition to these four broad accusations, a tremendous variety of miscellaneous dirt was dug up and laid at his door. This consisted largely of appeals to naked prejudice and crass selfishness. He was charged with cowardice, both per-

³ For example: *Address to the People of the United States: with an Epitome and Vindication of the Public Life and Character of Thomas Jefferson* (Philadelphia, 1800); *A Solemn Address, to Christians and Patriots, Upon the Approaching Election of a President of the United States: in Answer to a Pamphlet, Entitled "Serious Considerations," &c.* (New York, 1800). See also James Thomson Callender, writing as "A Scots Correspondent" in the *Richmond Examiner*. Margaret Tinkcom who is working on a checklist of this pamphlet material kindly placed her notes at my disposal.

⁴ See *The Politics and Views of a Certain Party Examined* (Philadelphia, 1792), in which Jefferson is blamed for beginning the party strife. In this pamphlet the points were made that were to become so familiar later: Jefferson is an idle dreamer; he wishes to become dictator; he is personally responsible for the excesses of the French Revolution; he possesses "no Conscience, no Religion, no Charity." See also *The Pretensions of Thomas Jefferson to the Presidency Refuted* (Philadelphia, 1796), in which he is accused of being a philosopher, and a poor one at that; of plotting dictatorship; and of plotting the emancipation of all slaves. This last was an aftermath of the Banneker letter of 1791.

⁵ See Howard R. Marraro, "The Four Versions of Jefferson's Letter to Mazzei," *William and Mary College Quarterly Historical Magazine*, 2d. ser., XXII (1942), 18-29.

sonal and moral, with sexual immorality, with dishonesty in business affairs, with political inefficiency; and with "want of personal firmness"⁶ by the specialists in character defamation.

It is clear to a modern student that the propaganda campaign against Jefferson was well conceived and that it was executed with something of the same imagination and finesse as were those of the late Herr Goebbels. From the pattern formed by the correspondence of the participants and from the propaganda itself, as demonstrated in pamphlets and newspapers,⁷ one can see that the program was carried on at two levels. The inner circle of Federalist leaders kept up an extensive correspondence, encouraging each other and aiding the circulation of the choicest bits of scandal. Then these men, each a local political leader in his own right, saw to it that a constant flow of pamphlets and newspaper editorials, embodying the standard charges, was produced for the delectation and edification of the reading public.

There is no accurate way of estimating the quantity of the anti-Jefferson material, but it is clear that it was enormous. The number of pamphlets issued by Jefferson's opponents and by his friends undoubtedly passed one hundred and several of the more popular went through many printings.⁸ The Federalist newspapers printed any anti-Jefferson smear they could obtain. The principal sources for this material were comments by the editor, series of guest editorials (the best known being "Burleigh" in the *Connecticut Courant* and "Decius" in the *Columbian Centinel*), random letters to the editor—some sincere, others obviously planted, and borrowings from other Federalist journals and from anti-Jefferson pamphlets. Altogether a very extensive and coordinated effort was made to defame the man, an effort worthy of a better cause.

⁶ "Citizen of the United States," *Virginia Gazette, and General Advertiser*, Oct. 10, 1800.

⁷ This material is being constantly enriched by new finds. Most nineteenth-century writers were handicapped by the incompleteness of the papers available for their use. It is amusing to speculate on the probable fate of some of the American demigods had some of the information about them come to light before their reputations became secure!

⁸ For example, the *Address to the People of the United States*, a pro-Jefferson pamphlet by John James Beckley, was printed in Richmond and Philadelphia in 1800. Abraham Bishop's *Connecticut Republicanism. An Oration, on the Extent & Power of Political Delusion* was published in 1800 in Philadelphia by Mathew Carey and in Newark by Pennington and Gould. *Desultory Reflections on the New Political Aspects of Public Affairs in the United States of America*, . . . was printed in New York and reprinted in Philadelphia.

III.

The first and most common of the charges against Jefferson was the accusation of infidelity and atheism. This old canard was refuted many times during the period of his public career, but such is the nature of the American electorate that the charge never lost its effectiveness. Centering in New England and kept alive during Adams' term of office by the energetic preaching of Calvinist clergymen,⁹ it became a convenient peg upon which to hang nearly any disagreement with any part of Jefferson's policy. The fear of atheism, the conviction that no good could come of an unbeliever, appears to have been sincere on the part of many people who otherwise found no fault with Jefferson, and this fear was effectively played upon.¹⁰

The general approach to the matter was by way of a speciously objective textual criticism of Jefferson's observations in the *Notes on Virginia*. In this field the disputants were at home; New England had a long tradition of doctrinal and theological controversy as well as one of bitter intolerance for unorthodox views. The Reverend John M. Mason, after announcing, "I dread the election of Mr. Jefferson, because I believe him

⁹ See the Fourth of July Oration delivered by Timothy Dwight, president of Yale, in 1798: "For what end shall we be connected with men of whom this is the character and the conduct ["the illuminati, the philosophers, the atheists, and the deists"]? Is it that we may assume the same character and pursue the same conduct? Is it that our churches may become temples of reason, our Sabbath a decade, and our psalms of praise Marseillais hymns? Is it that we may change our holy worship into a dance of Jacobin phrenzy and that we may behold a strumpet personating a Goddess on the altars of JEHOVAH? Is it that we may see the Bible cast into a bonfire, the vessels of the sacramental supper borne by an ass in public procession, and our children, either wheedled or terrified, uniting in chanting mockeries against God, and hailing in the sounds of *ca ira*, the ruin of their religion and the loss of their souls? Is it that we may see our wives and daughters the victims of legal prostitution; soberly dishonoured; speciously polluted; the outcasts of delicacy and virtue, the loathing of God and man? . . . Shall we, my brethren, become partakers of these sins? Shall we introduce them into our government, our schools, our families? Shall our sons become the disciples of Voltaire, and the dragoons of Marat; or our daughters the concubines of the Illuminati?" *Duty of Americans, at the Present Crisis, Illustrated in a Discourse, Preached on the Fourth of July, 1798 . . . at the Request of the Citizens of New Haven*; quoted in Charles A. Beard, *Economic Origins of Jeffersonian Democracy* (New York, 1915), 365-366.

¹⁰ The author of *Serious Considerations on the Election of a President: Addressed to the Citizens of the United States* (New York, 1800) made clear that his only ground for objection to Jefferson was the latter's "disbelief in the Holy Scriptures and in his profession of Deism."

to be a confirmed infidel," went on to rejoice that Jefferson stood convicted as such by his writings:

The general opinion rarely, if ever, mistakes a character which private pursuits and public functions have placed in different attitudes; . . . the belief of Mr. Jefferson's infidelity, which has for years been uniform and strong, wherever his character has been a subject of speculation—although that infidelity has been boasted by some, lamented by many, and undisputed by all, yet it is now denied by his friends, the charge, unsupported by other proof, could hardly be pursued to conviction. Happily for truth and for us, Mr. Jefferson has *written*; he has *printed*.¹¹

The *Notes* provided ample opportunity for casuistry. In searching out evidences of Jefferson's heresy, the divines found that he had doubted the reality of the deluge. This they made into a thoroughly reprehensible apostasy. He also appeared to have sinned in questioning the theologians' verdict as to the age of the earth.¹² His unfortunate comment in the *Notes* as to the probable biological differences between the white and black races was interpreted as a denial of the doctrine of the brotherhood of man. It further challenged the notion of the "chosen people."¹³ He was indicted for opposing the reading of the Bible by school children.¹⁴ Much was also made of his remark, "it does me no injury for my neighbor to say there are twenty gods, or no god. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg." This, instead of demonstrating Jefferson's tolerance, was said to prove that he cared nothing for his own soul or for that of his neighbor.¹⁵

The investigation into Jefferson's writings demonstrated to his opponents' satisfaction that he was indeed an atheist:

What is a man who writes against the truth of God's word? who makes not even a *profession* of Christianity? who is without Sabbaths; without the sanctuary; without so much as a decent external respect for the faith and worship of Christians? What *is* he, what *can he be*, but a decided, a hardened infidel?¹⁶

The reference to Jefferson being "without Sabbaths" had to do with a cer-

¹¹ *The Voice of Warning, to Christians, on the Ensuing Election of a President of the United States* (New York, 1800), 8.

¹² *Ibid.*, 9-14; *Serious Considerations*, 6-8.

¹³ *Voice of Warning*, 14-18.

¹⁴ *Serious Considerations*, 14-16.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 17-19.

¹⁶ *Voice of Warning*, 22-23.

tain public reception in his honor held in Fredericksburg. Although apparently a very decorous affair, it earned the disapprobation of the clergy because it took place on a Sunday.¹⁷ The pamphleteers also repeated the story, supposedly originally told by Mazzei, that Jefferson had said, upon seeing a church in disrepair, "It is good enough for him who was born in a manger."¹⁸

The election of this unbeliever would produce at least three disastrous effects on the national existence. It would give the country an "unfavorable character with foreign nations," by putting the United States in the same category with France.¹⁹ It would "destroy religion, introduce immorality, and loosen all the bonds of society" at home.²⁰ Third, there was concern over "the dishonor which would be done to God, and the fear of his displeasure, if an opposer of Christianity should be preferred."²¹ In all this the pamphleteers denied that they were being intolerant of Jefferson. They quoted the Bible as to the sacred character of political authority and insisted that since the primary duty of the magistrate was the glorification of God, no atheist or Deist had any right to hold public office.²²

Quantitatively the charge of atheism was the most important attack made on Jefferson during the campaign. Certain observations are in point. Primarily one is struck by the astonishing cynicism displayed by the Federalists in assaulting Jefferson as an atheist when his religious opinions differed only imperceptibly, if at all, from their own. Deism was the fashion; Washington's religion (to say nothing of Hamilton's) was no better nor no worse than that of Jefferson. It is also instructive to note that for a picture of the future fate of religion if Jefferson were elected the clergy looked to France instead of to Virginia and its disestablished church. The latter, although a good indication of Jefferson's idea of public

¹⁷ *Serious Considerations*, 25.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 16-17.

¹⁹ *Serious Considerations*, 19.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 24. "Let the first magistrate be a professed infidel, and infidels will surround him. . . . Let him spend the Sabbath in feasting, in visiting or receiving visits, in riding abroad, but never in going to church; and to frequent public worship will become unfashionable." *Ibid.*, 25-26. Another prediction was made in the *Hudson Bee*, Sept. 7, 1800, reprinted from the *New-England Palladium*: "Should the infidel Jefferson be elected to the Presidency, the *seal of death* is that moment set on our holy religion, our churches will be prostrated, and some infamous prostitute, under the title of the Goddess of Reason, will preside in the Sanctuaries now devoted to the worship of the Most High."

²¹ *Serious Considerations*, 27-28.

²² *Voice of Warning*, 30-35.

policy toward religion, failed to provide the sensational disclosures thought vital to the campaign—and so it was conveniently ignored.

The suspicion that “atheist” was used on Jefferson just as “communist” is today applied to Henry Wallace or to any other political figure who challenges the basic assumptions of our society cannot be overlooked. Casual name-calling of this sort is useful because it avoids the necessity of a serious discussion of the issues on their merits. It often forces the victim to dissipate his energies in defending himself and draws the attention of the voters to irrelevancies and away from the main point, the challenge to the *status quo*.

IV.

Another persistent avenue of attack upon Jefferson was the charge that as a man given to abstract speculation he was automatically disqualified from holding the office of President. This was a shrewd stroke, for the average American was (and is) profoundly suspicious of formal learning in politics, particularly when it is of a theoretical or speculative nature.²³ That philosophic insight is an insuperable bar to political leadership is an illogical notion, but a lack of logic has in no way impaired its vigor.²⁴ In 1796 it was asserted that Jefferson, although a “philosopher” (horrid word!), was not a very good one; adequate to be a college professor, perhaps, but never President.²⁵ The fact that he had written a book was made much of as proof of his unfitness. “Burleigh” pointed out that Jefferson had written the *Notes on Virginia* “to theorize about government. All the ideas which were derived from Experience were hooted at.”²⁶ Another pam-

²³ “Mr. Jefferson is a native of Virginia, and I am ready to admit that he is distinguished for shewy talents, for theoretic learning, and for the elegance of his *written* style.” *Address to the Citizens of South Carolina on the Approaching Election of a President and Vice-President of the United States. By a Federal Republican* (Charleston, 1800), 9.

²⁴ One need only recall the derogatory remarks made of Mr. Roosevelt as “a man who never met a payroll in his life” and the even more ironic analyses of the New Deal “government by professors” to realize that distrust of academicians in politics is very much alive. It is amusing to note that the Federalists, accusing Jefferson of being a theorist, were themselves champions of a very systematic political theory: their party collapsed because they clung to their dogmas in the face of controverting facts. On the other hand Jefferson, the “impractical,” proved to be one of the most flexible and undoctinaire of Presidents.

²⁵ *The Pretensions of Thomas Jefferson to the Presidency Examined*, cited in Coley R. Taylor and Samuel Middlebrook, *The Eagle Screams* (New York, 1936), 72.

²⁶ *Connecticut Courant*, July 12, 1800.

phleteer found that Jefferson's "atheism" was the direct result of his investigations into "natural philosophy" and added that so long as he confined his attention to that field, his infidelity would do no harm. It was only when he attempted to carry his heresy into politics that serious danger resulted.²⁷

The Federalists tended to link, after the manner of Edmund Burke, the systematic philosophy of the eighteenth century with the blood bath of the French Revolution, and found something diabolical in Jefferson's interest in abstract learning:

It was in France, where he resided nearly seven years, and until the revolution had made some progress, that his disposition to theory, and his skepticism in religion, morals, and government, acquired full strength and vigor. . . . Mr. Jefferson is known to be a theorist in politics, as well as in philosophy and morals.—He is a *philosophe* in the modern French sense of the word.²⁸

This interest in "philosophy" was particularly irritating to the leaders of the Federalists. Considering themselves the acme of practicality, the first to perceive the clear and realistic relation between capital and government, they found Jefferson's ignoring of these truths very offensive (and dangerous). Their correspondence reveals their impatience. Philip Schuyler felt that Jefferson was "pervaded with the mad French philosophy."²⁹ Fisher Ames, the bellwether of Massachusetts Federalism, wrote in January, 1800:

Political fanaticism has its run in Virginia. I give them credit for being fools in earnest, as to Democracy. . . . Jefferson, in 1789, wrote some such stuff about the will of majorities, as a New Englander would lose his rank among men of sense to avow.³⁰

Thirteen months later, writing in the *Palladium*, immediately prior to Jefferson's election by the House of Representatives, Ames said:

²⁷ *Claims of Thomas Jefferson*, 49-51. The author of *The Claims of Thomas Jefferson to the Presidency, Examined at the Bar of Christianity* (Philadelphia, 1800) expressed a somewhat similar view (p. 12).

²⁸ *Address to the Citizens of South Carolina*, 10, 15.

²⁹ Schuyler to Jay, May 7, 1800, H. P. Johnson, ed., *Correspondence and Public Papers of John Jay* (New York, 1890-1893), IV, 273.

³⁰ Ames to Oliver Wolcott, Jan. 12, 1800, George Gibbs, ed., *Memoirs of the Administration of Washington and John Adams* (New York, 1846), II, 318.

like most men of genius, he [Jefferson] has been carried away by systems, and the everlasting zeal to generalize, instead of proceeding, like common men of practical sense, on the slow, but sure foundation of matter of fact.³¹

The weighty Charles Carroll of Carrollton, full of years and wisdom, also found Jefferson "too theoretical and fanciful a statesman to direct with prudence the affairs of this extensive and growing confederacy." Carroll felt that Jefferson's "experiments" could be tolerated "in the little republic of St. Marino" but that his "fantastic tricks" would dissolve the Union.³²

V.

References to the "Mazzei letter" were also persistent during the campaign. This unfortunate epistle, written by Jefferson to his Italian friend in 1796, had found its way in a somewhat garbled version into the public prints as early as 1797.³³ In his letter Jefferson had unburdened himself of some trenchant observations on Federalist politics and their aristocratic, pro-English orientation, including one offhand remark about men "who were Samsons in the field and Solomons in the Council, but who have had their heads shorn by the whore of England." This was immediately seized by the Federalists and termed an insult to Washington,³⁴ and all the fury of a hero-worshipping people was vented on the iconoclast. By 1800 the heat of the campaign and the recent death of Washington furnished a convenient opportunity to refurbish the old story, and Federalist propagandists of all shades and stations made full use of it.

³¹ Letters of "Falkland," in Seth Ames, ed., *The Life and Works of Fisher Ames* (Boston, 1854), II, 314.

³² Carroll to Hamilton, April 18, 1800, J. C. Hamilton, ed., *The Works of Alexander Hamilton* (New York, 1850, 1851), VI, 434-435.

³³ Marraro, 19.

³⁴ Jefferson went even further in private conversation, as revealed shortly after his inauguration in a letter from Benjamin Rush: "In contemplating the Change you have produced in the public mind, I have been carried back to an interesting Conversation with you about two years ago in which you *predicted* it. I did not concur with you; for our country was then so much Under the influence of the *name* of [Washington in Jefferson's hand] the *plans* of [Hamilton in Jefferson's hand] and the *press* of Peter Porcupine that I despaired of a resuscitation of its republican Spirit. You said the death of two men (whom you named) would render your prediction *speedy*, as well as *certain*. They both died in 1799 [Washington and Patrick Henry died in that year.] In the third month of the year 1801 we have become 'all Republicans—all federalists.'" Rush to Jefferson, March 12, 1801. See Jefferson Papers, CX, 18928, Library of Congress. I am indebted to Mr. Lyman Butterfield for this reference.

Early in 1800, William Rind of the *Virginia Federalist* used Washington's funeral as the occasion to deliver a stinging rebuke to Jefferson on the score of the Mazzei letter. This attained a wide currency, being reprinted in so august—and partisan—a journal as the *Gazette of the United States*:

The letter to Mazzei the Italian philosopher written by Mr. Jefferson some time ago cannot be forgotten. . . . The people cannot forget the author of that high wrought calumny on him who was their Samson in the field and their Solomon in council. Let every American citizen read it, and consider with himself, whether Thomas Jefferson is worthy of succeeding to the office of PRESIDENT of a free, affectionate and virtuous people. That he wrote the letter is unquestionable. It is no palliation that it was written confidentially to an intimate friend across the Atlantic, to whom Mr. Jefferson was unbosoming his soul. It was well for this gentleman that it was not known prior to the last election of President and Vice-President: It is well for him that the law of limitation shields him from punishment. However no punishment which the laws could inflict for such a crime would be sufficient. It can only be sufficiently punished by a sense of contempt toward the author. . . .³⁵

As the campaign continued, the Mazzei letter remained prominent in anti-Jefferson literature. Pamphleteers relied upon it to prove Jefferson's hostility to the Constitution.³⁶ It was also very useful to buttress assaults on Jefferson's moral character. To "Brutus" it proved Jefferson's "duplicity" and love of the underhanded;³⁷ a "Citizen of the United States" felt that the lack of agreement between Jefferson's address to the Senate upon assuming the Vice-Presidency (on which occasion he had spoken favorably of Washington) and the Mazzei letter demonstrated his lack of character and a shocking "want of personal firmness."³⁸ An open letter to Jefferson in the *Gazette of the United States* invited him to withdraw from the race because

considering your talents and the hypocritical part you have acted, developed by your letter to mazzei, your election to the Presidency [will be a] measure

³⁵ *Virginia Federalist*, Jan. 22, 1800.

³⁶ [John Ward Fenno], *Desultory Reflections on the Political Aspects of Public Affairs in the United States of America* (New York, 1800), 16; *Address to the Citizens of South Carolina*, 11.

³⁷ *Virginia Gazette, and General Advertiser*, Sept. 30, 1800, reprinted from the *Baltimore Federal Gazette*.

³⁸ *Virginia Gazette, and General Advertiser*, Oct. 10, 1800.

more ruinous and destructive to the liberties and happiness of America, than almost any event that could occur. Your friends, resembling yourself in disposition and character, would fill all those offices now occupied by upright and patriotic Americans.³⁹

Not only was the Mazzei letter declared to slander Washington, but it was also said to prove Jefferson's foreign bias. Not alone pro-French (was not the letter originally written in that vile tongue?) but anti-British also, Jefferson was pictured as wishing to embark upon a mad course of foreign policy which would bring about the twin horrors of fraternization with France and war with Great Britain.⁴⁰ "Decius" perceived the "ruinous effects upon our external relations, by uniting us in a close connection with France and involving us in a war with *Great Britain*."⁴¹ To John Ward Fenno, Jefferson's anti-English outpourings smacked of heresy.⁴²

VI.

To be labeled "pro-French" in 1800 was almost as damaging to a politician's character as it is today to be stigmatized "friendly to Russia." Only disaster could come to the American people, disaster and complete subversion of their government, were Jefferson elected to the Presidency. "If Mr. Jefferson is determined to follow, keep up, and Adopt French Politics —If he becomes President, Civil War & Ruin, will, certainly, & shortly too, ensue."⁴³ Thus wrote an indignant Virginia Federalist late in the year, when the decision of the voters had already been rendered and hopes of saving the country from the "fangs of Jefferson" were centered in the House of Representatives. This had been a recurrent theme during the entire campaign. Jefferson, the power-mad demagogue, was represented as

³⁹ *Gazette of the United States and Daily Advertiser*, August 18, 1800. The high-level Federalists also realized the efficacy of the Mazzei letter. John Marshall remarked, "The morals of the author of the letter to Mazzei cannot be pure." Marshall to Hamilton, Jan. 1, 1801, *Works of Hamilton*, VI, 502.

⁴⁰ *Connecticut Courant*, August 29, 1800.

⁴¹ *Columbian Centinel*, Sept. 20, 1800.

⁴² *Desultory Reflections*, 6. In 1799 William Cobbett had written: "Jefferson hates Great Britain for several reasons: 1st because she is the great bulwark against the horde of atheists and anarchists, of whom he is an avowed advocate; 2nd, because he, like a base coward as he is, fled at the approach of her armies; 3rd, because he committed the sin of rebellion against her; and 4th . . . because *he owes her merchants a large sum of money*." *Porcupine's Works* (London, 1801), XII, 131.

⁴³ R. Hooe to Colonel Leven Powell, Dec. 23, 1800, *John P. Branch Historical Papers* I, 243.

determined to reshape the country in the image of France. Since, of course, all sturdy Christians and patriots were bound to resist such a course, the outcome must be a bitter civil war. The responsibility for the struggle would be Jefferson's, and the blood of the widows and orphans who would fall victim to the rapacity of the Jacobins would be on his head. "Burleigh" painted a very melancholy picture:

There is scarcely a possibility that we shall escape a *Civil War*. . . . Murder, robbery, rape, adultery, and incest will all be openly taught and practiced, the air will be rent with the cries of distress, the soil will be soaked with blood, and the nation black with crimes.⁴⁴

Fisher Ames had perceived the danger early in the campaign; and in January he wrote Wolcott of the dismal prospect. With "Jefferson & Co., at the head of a stronger faction than any government can struggle with long," he doubted that the election would be held. The choice would be made by force, for "all other modes of decision will be spurned as soon as the antis think they have force on their side."⁴⁵

The people were then threatened with an added horror—the introduction of foreign troops into the country. It was confidently stated that the actual fighting in the forthcoming civil war would probably not be done by the Jacobins themselves, numerous though they were; instead, Jefferson would call upon France and Napoleon's veterans (estimates of their number ranged from fifty to a hundred thousand) would invade the country to perform the bloody work.⁴⁶ The Jacobins would welcome the butchery of their countrymen, because "Jacobins in all countries are destitute of morality and religion" and the American variety, being as depraved as any,

⁴⁴ *Connecticut Courant*, Sept. 20, 1800.

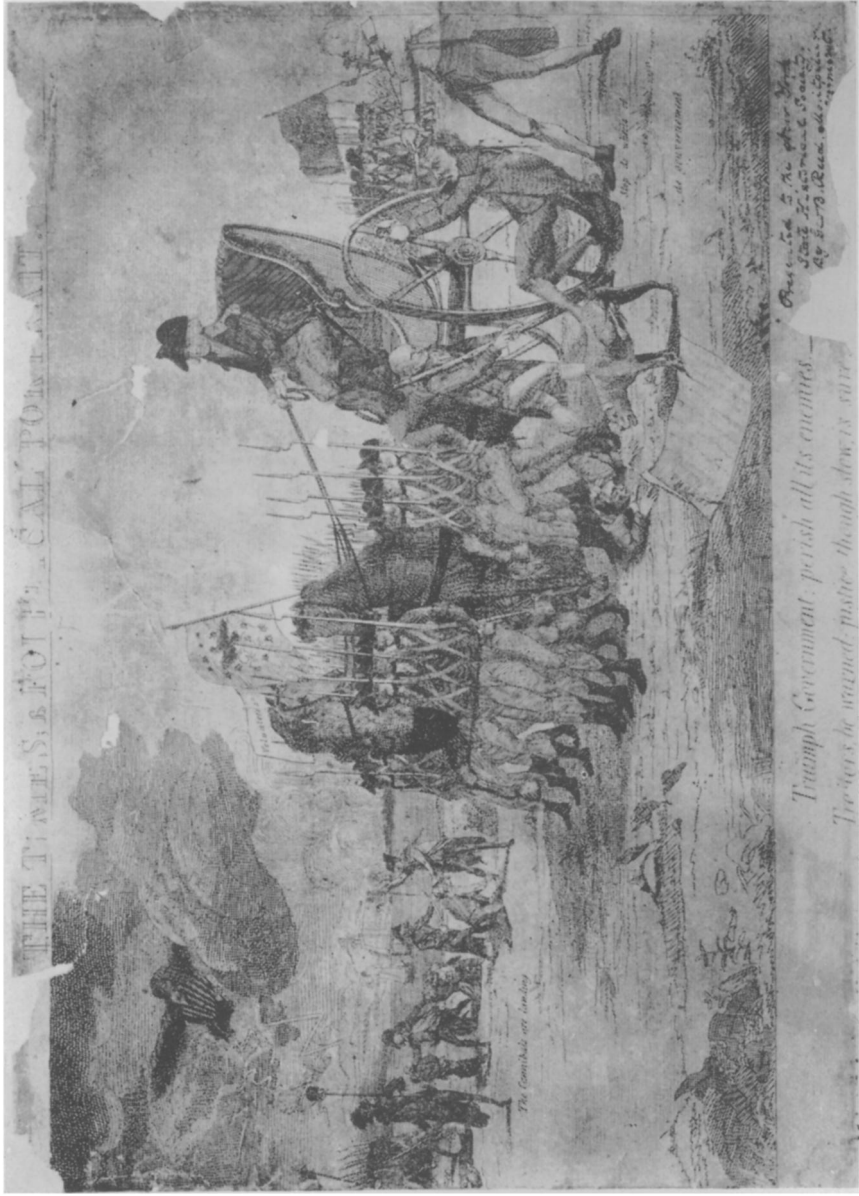
⁴⁵ Ames to Wolcott, Jan. 12, 1800, Gibbs, *Memoirs*, II, 320. Hamilton also shared the fear of violence. He saw the dangers of "faction" demonstrated in Virginia, and felt that the leaders there who "possess completely all the powers of the local government, are resolved to possess those of the national, by the most dangerous of combinations; and if they cannot affect this, to resort to the employment of physical force." Hamilton to Rufus King, Jan. 5, 1800, *Works of Hamilton*, VI, 415. Madison wrote Jefferson after the election of his fear that the Federalists on their part would resort to force: "The result of the contest in the House of Representatives was generally looked for in this quarter. It was thought not possible that the phalanx would hold out against the general revolt of its partizans out of doors, and without any military force to abet usurpation. How fortunate that the latter has been withheld! and what a lesson to America and the world is given by the efficacy of the public will, when there is no army to be turned against it." Madison to Jefferson, Feb. 28, 1801, *Letters and Other Writings of James Madison* (Philadelphia, 1865) II, 171.

⁴⁶ Taylor and Middlebrook, 83.



Courtesy of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania

The earliest known anti-Jefferson cartoon, Published in New York in 1793 during the height of the Genet furor, it shows Jefferson (with the gavel) presiding over the Philadelphia "Democratic" Society, founded in July of that year.



Courtesy of the New York Historical Society

This print (issued in 1798 or '99 when Washington was Commander-in-Chief of the forces mobilized following the XYZ Affair in expectation of war with France) shows Jefferson (at the far right) with Gallatin, traitorously attempting to clog the "Wheels of Government" as the French "Cannibals" land and massacre American civilians. Duane, the editor of the *Aurora*, is trampled; the fourth "Traitor" is possibly Madison.

"only want an opportunity to be as cruel and abandoned as those of France."⁴⁷

"Burleigh," who was quite certain that it was necessary to "Look upon every leading Jacobin as a ravening wolf, prepared to enter your peaceful fold, and glut his deadly appetite on the vitals of your country,"⁴⁸ expatiated on the "convulsions to come. . . . Trace the bloody scene with a severe eye. Mark its horrors. Brood over its calamities: . . . will you enter the crazy barque of Jacobinism, to be wrecked in the tempestuous sea of *French* liberty?"⁴⁹ The editor of the *Virginia Federalist*, less sanguinary than his fellow prophets, foresaw social and economic chaos as the consequences of a Jeffersonian victory:

Aye, aye, fellow-citizens, vote for Mr. Jefferson—he'll cure all our disorders—he'll relieve us from taxes—he'll make us rich as Croesus—besides he prefers the tempestuous sea of liberty—the furious storm of revolution—aye, aye, vote for Mr. Jefferson—he'll make us happy—he'll turn your army and navy adrift—all the federal officers, all the old patriots—he'll play the devil with the damned banks, the funding system, the bane of democracy—he'll put a stop to commerce—he'll introduce a new order of things—such a one as will make every demo happy, no doubt.⁵⁰

Those who foresaw awful consequences from the inescapable civil war were also certain that, once elected, Jefferson was determined to use his position to augment his own personal power. He is freely termed a "Dictator"⁵¹ and ominous parallels were drawn between the future of the United States and the course of events in France. If revolutionary excesses there had eventuated in the emergence of a dictator, what could be more logical than to suppose that the same thing would happen in America? Nothing. And so Jefferson came to be considered as the Bonaparte of American Jacobinism.⁵² John Ward Fenno was quite certain that Jefferson was aiming at dictatorship:

⁴⁷ Quoted in James Clarke Welling, *Addresses, Lectures, and Other Papers* (Cambridge, 1903), 287-288.

⁴⁸ *Connecticut Courant*, Oct. 8, 1800.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, Sept. 15, 1800.

⁵⁰ *Virginia Federalist*, Feb. 26, 1800.

⁵¹ T. Evans to Colonel Leven Powell, Oct. 30, 1800, *John P. Branch Historical Papers*, I, 55. Evans also complained that Jefferson had cheapened the government by having his notification of election as Vice-President sent through the mails instead of being delivered by messenger.

⁵² *Virginia Gazette, and General Advertiser*, Oct. 21, 1800, reprinting editorial from the *Commercial Advertiser*. Jefferson is termed a "Jacobin First Consul."

The Constitution overthrown, . . . the new organization . . . with perhaps so much of the French system engrafted thereon, as to provide some Consulates for the Chief and his Compeers, succeeds to that system under which we once had the fairest chance of prosperity and happiness.⁵³

Robert Goodloe Harper also made much of Jefferson's "lust for power";⁵⁴ John Marshall saw an attempt on Jefferson's part to "increase his personal power";⁵⁵ Fisher Ames foresaw a "reign of rigor and agitation."⁵⁶

Why was Jefferson's election so certain to bring about civil war and dictatorship? The smearers had a ready answer. Catastrophe must follow a Jacobin triumph because Jefferson had "long felt a deadly hostility against the Federal Government." He "*and his party have long endeavored to destroy the Federal Constitution*"; "*if Mr. Jefferson should be elected President, the Constitution will inevitably fall a sacrifice to Jacobinism.*"⁵⁷ This, one of the commonest charges against Jefferson, was reiterated and elaborated with commendable energy throughout the entire campaign. John Ward Fenno praised the Constitution and then pointed out that "the universal end of Jacobinism is the the [*sic*] overthrow of whatever good exists." Thus the Jeffersonians were forced by their very natures to be confirmed enemies of the Constitution and dedicated to its subversion. "This end they hope and mean to obtain through the instrumentality of the Candidate whom they are seeking to exalt to the Chief Magistracy."⁵⁸ Jefferson himself was found guilty of hostility to the Constitution and stood revealed as its enemy despite his frantic efforts to conceal his views; the Mazzei letter was proof positive of his duplicity.⁵⁹ The slavish follower of every twist and turn of public opinion, he had feigned approval of the work of the Convention of 1787 only because it was politically expedient. Once in power, he would use all the force at his command to destroy it.⁶⁰

⁵³ *Desultory Reflections*, 27.

⁵⁴ *Virginia Gazette, and General Advertiser*, extra of May 30, 1800.

⁵⁵ Marshall to Hamilton, Jan. 1, 1801, *Works of Hamilton*, VI, 502.

⁵⁶ Ames to Thomas Dwight, Dec. 27, 1800, *Works of Ames*, I, 286. In this and the two preceding quotations there is an echo of the classic Polybian cyclical theory of government. Jefferson, as the leader of the rabble, was considered as bringing democracy, which by definition would speedily degenerate, through its own inner contradictions, into dictatorship. This theory was a standard part of the classical education of the period.

⁵⁷ "Burleigh," *Connecticut Courant*, July 21, 23, August 1, 1800.

⁵⁸ *Desultory Reflections*, 15.

⁵⁹ *Address to the Citizens of South Carolina*, 11.

⁶⁰ *Desultory Reflections*, 15-16. "Decius," in the *Columbian Centinel* of Sept. 20, 1800, speaks of Jefferson's "rooted antipathy to the Federal Constitution and his fixed determination to overthrow it."

What proof could be adduced that this was really Jefferson's aim? Prompt came the answer:

The confidence reposed in Mr. Jefferson, and the anxiety for his election, discovered by the most avowed enemies of the constitution, is a sure pledge that he is known by them to retain his enmity to it, and will favor attempts at material alterations, if not the total subversion of it, at every hazard.⁶¹

But were there not actual examples of his disapproval of the Federal government? Indeed there were; and the most damning was his opposition "to the salutary measures of those who have been heretofore at the helm."⁶² Among the "salutary measures" which he was castigated for opposing were the suppression of the Whiskey Rebellion,⁶³ Jay's Treaty,⁶⁴ and the funding system. Above all, the funding system. "Decius" made the grounds of opposition abundantly clear:

Tremble then in case of Jefferson's election, all ye holders of public funds, for your ruin is at hand. . . . I believe that he was sincere in his hatred of the funding system and that he will do everything in his power to overthrow it—I believe it because he has expressed it confidentially to his friend Mazzei—because Virginians possess little or nothing of the public debt—because Jefferson possesses *none* of it.⁶⁵

Fenno sounded the same note: "The inseparable concomitant of the abolition of the present form of Government, is the annihilation of its debt. . . ."⁶⁶ He drew a dark picture of the fate of the thousands of widows and orphans who would be thus impoverished. "Marcellus" was equally perturbed:

The funding system has ever been the subject of the loudest clamours among the Jacobins. When they have the power, will they not subvert it? They commonly use all the power they possess for the purpose of mischief. . . .⁶⁷

⁶¹ *Address to the Citizens of South Carolina*, 13.

⁶² Philip Schuyler to Jay, May 7, 1800, *Correspondence of Jay*, IV, 273.

⁶³ *Virginia Gazette, and General Advertiser*, Oct. 3, 1800, reprinting "Brutus" from the *Baltimore Federal Gazette*.

⁶⁴ "A Citizen of Albemarle," *Virginia Gazette, and General Advertiser*, March 28, 1800. In this letter it was asserted that Jefferson's opposition to the treaty was based on his large unpaid debt to British merchants.

⁶⁵ *Columbian Centinel*, August 27, 1800.

⁶⁶ *Desultory Reflections*, 25.

⁶⁷ *New York Spectator*, April 26, 1800. The author of the *Address to the Citizens of South Carolina* was also aware of the Jeffersonian menace to the Federalist financial system.

A dominant industrial and commercial society was essential to the preservation of the Federalist economic system and Jefferson's agrarian preferences naturally came in for their share of abuse from the Federalist camp. "Decius" objected to his "contempt for commerce and commercial men—and his despicable opinion of the morals and principles of mechanics, and his attachment to foreign manufactures—and to foreign *carrying* trade. . . ."⁶⁸ A Connecticut pamphleteer damned Jefferson's opposition to commerce⁶⁹; and the ineffable "Burleigh" looked toward an unhappy future:

If Mr. Jefferson is President, the navy is laid up, the ships are to rot at our wharves, our commerce is again to be plundered, our farmers are to be impoverished, and our merchants ruined.⁷⁰

If Jefferson was determined to overthrow the Constitution and undo the work of the founding fathers, there was no doubt of what he had in mind to replace them with. Although details varied with the imagination of the writer, there was substantial agreement that an American version of revolutionary France, complete with the execution of aristocrats, the death of religion, and the extinction of industry and commerce comprised the Jeffersonian platform.⁷¹ The story of Jefferson's partiality to France was well known, and the attempts of the Federalists to capitalize on American antipathy to the Terror had worked very well in 1796.⁷² By 1800 the anti-French frenzy had died down somewhat and the propagandists were forced to redouble their efforts to evoke the old response. "Burleigh" wrote darkly of a conspiracy, which included Jefferson, Madison, Monroe and all the other leading Jacobins, to flood the country with every "seditious, slanderous, demoralizing, atheistical publication which industry and wickedness" could collect. He went on to point out that

⁶⁸ *Columbian Centinel*, Sept. 20, 1800.

⁶⁹ *A Rod for a Fool's Back*, quoted in Beard, 363.

⁷⁰ *Connecticut Courant*, August 28, 1800.

⁷¹ This was an old favorite. "Gustavus," in the *Connecticut Courant* of July 24, 1797, said: "I pity my countrymen, if Jefferson is 'their man.' If he is, the people of the United States had better strike their colors, attend the funeral rites of Liberty and Independence, assume the tri-colored cockade, . . . and introduce *ca ira* and *carmagnole* for their church music. Thomas Jefferson would then dispense the rites of the altar with pious alacrity, and Thomas Paine would be his proper deacon to distribute the sacrament of the devil's communion." See also *The Politics and Views of a Certain Party Examined* (1792), in which Jefferson is blamed for the commencement of the Revolution and its bloodshed.

⁷² Claude Bowers, *Jefferson and Hamilton* (Boston and New York, 1925), 310-314.

through control of the Post Office they would be able to disseminate "falsehood, sedition and atheism" and "spread the seeds of confusion, anarchy and slavery" among the people.⁷³ All this was obviously on the French model. The long story of Jefferson's "intrigues" with Genet, Fauchet and Adet was brought up again to prove that he was no patriot.⁷⁴ He was reported to have consulted with Fauchet prior to withdrawing from the Cabinet;⁷⁵ he was accused of proposing a common Franco-American citizenship to Adet;⁷⁶ it was asserted that in the event of his election Jefferson would forfeit American interests in any negotiations with France.⁷⁷ The active intervention of France in the election was predicted and disastrous consequences foreseen:

the election of Mr. Jefferson would be the elevation of the man of the choice of France. The rulers and representatives of that nation have fixed their eyes upon him; they know his enthusiasm in their cause; his coincidence of opinion as to religion and government; they have courted and adulated him—they have intrigued openly for him on the first election, and are now doing so more covertly at the second. This is a strong reason why he should not be the choice of America.

*When a man is the favorer, and the favorite of a nation, which has heaped injuries on the head of his country, he is the last man to whom his fellow-citizens should entrust the government.*⁷⁸

The vision of Jefferson the radical was now complete: he was held to be pro-French, a foe of the Constitution, a plotter of untold horrors, a seizer of personal power. All these characteristics presaged unmistakably the immediate destruction of everything that true Americans held dear. A Jeffersonian government augured both domestic and foreign chaos. Considering the violence and immoderation of this sort of accusation, it is a tribute to the good sense of the people that the bogey of revolution had such little effect.

⁷³ *Connecticut Courant*, August 29, 1800.

⁷⁴ *Address to the Citizens of South Carolina*, 14.

⁷⁵ *Virginia Gazette, and General Advertiser*, Sept. 30, 1800, reprinting "Brutus" from the *Baltimore Federal Gazette*.

⁷⁶ "Thousands of American Republicans," *Virginia Gazette, and General Advertiser*, Oct. 31, 1800.

⁷⁷ *Virginia Gazette, and General Advertiser*, Oct. 17, 1800, reprinting "Observer" from the *New York Gazette*.

⁷⁸ *Address to the Citizens of South Carolina*, 15.

VII.

Thus we see that the principal points of attack upon Jefferson during the campaign were his atheism, his impracticality, the Mazzei letter, his pro-French, revolutionary leanings, his plotting the destruction of the government, and his opposition to Federalist policies. Beyond these, however, there was no end to the petty spiteful charges that were made. It was Jefferson's unhappy fate to be, like Lincoln and like Franklin Roosevelt, a man of marked personal traits and strong feelings. This made him an easy target for all manner of undercover onslaughts. An example is the story of Jefferson's unpaid debt to English merchants. Though systematically refuted by his friends,⁷⁹ this tale reappears constantly. "A Citizen of Albe-marle," who claimed to be one of Jefferson's neighbors, told the story in great detail, naming the merchants and giving dates. He showed how Jefferson first offered depreciated bonds in payment of the debt, and then equally depreciated currency; how after the Treaty of Paris he offered to pay the principal on condition that the interest be forgiven; and finally how Jefferson's opposition to Jay's Treaty stemmed from the fear that his debts would become collectible under its terms.⁸⁰ This same correspondent had earlier "exposed" the desperate condition of Jefferson's personal finances and indicated that he was counting on having the United States government pay his debts.⁸¹

Southern antipathies were aroused by the revelation of Jefferson's views on Negroes and emancipation. True, he had made no secret of them. His hope of eventual emancipation had been written into the *Notes on Virginia* and published to the world, and his legislative proposals had been made openly; but now that he was campaigning for President his opinion of slavery acquired a new and horrendous significance. He was accused of entertaining "opinions unfriendly to the property, which forms the efficient labor of a great part of the southern states. . . ."⁸² The *Notes on Virginia* and that innocent gesture of courtesy, the letter to Banneker, were cited as evidence. The Southern fear of a servile insurrection was shrewdly ex-

⁷⁹ Notably in the *Address to the People of the United States*, 17-20. Modern scholarship has proved the essential correctness of this version. See Dumas Malone, *Jefferson the Virginian* (Boston, 1948), 260.

⁸⁰ *Virginia Gazette, and General Advertiser*, March 28, 1800.

⁸¹ See James Thomson Callender's reply to this charge, *Richmond Examiner*, Jan. 7, 1800. Also *ibid.*, March 7, 1800.

⁸² *Address to the Citizens of South Carolina*, 15.

ploited by pointing to the awful example of St. Domingo. "Fabius" contended that "of all men Mr. Jefferson when due consideration is had of his political sentiments will appear to have the smallest claim upon the voters of Virginia, or of the Southern states."⁸³ His objection was to Jefferson's proposal for a broadening of the suffrage in Virginia, which was interpreted as a denial of the "validity of the present constitution of Virginia." Universal suffrage would mean the enfranchisement of free Negroes, an idea typically French. The result of such a daring step would be (inescapably) a servile insurrection!⁸⁴

No smear campaign worthy of the name has ever run its course without devoting some consideration to the sexual irregularities of the candidate. This, the smear at its worst, did not get into the newspapers, but "Mr. Jefferson's Congo Harem" became a subject of the whispers that always mark such a campaign. The figure of "Dusky Sally Henings" became quite well known, and a full set of circumstances detailing places and dates of Jefferson's relations with her were spread abroad. She was asserted to be a resident of Monticello, and all her children were reported to bear a strong resemblance to Jefferson.⁸⁵

Jefferson was also accused of cowardice. This took two forms: he was said to be a moral coward and to lack personal courage. The first was demonstrated by his resignation from Washington's cabinet while under fire; it was claimed that he thus sought to avoid public objection to the suppression of the Whiskey Rebellion.⁸⁶ His being a poltroon was proved

⁸³ *Virginia Gazette, and General Advertiser*, Oct. 10, 1800.

⁸⁴ The same distrust of Jefferson's support of universal suffrage was voiced by "Thousands of American Republicans." See *ibid.*, Oct. 31, 1800.

⁸⁵ Taylor and Middlebrook, 85. The full force of the charge of immorality was not felt until 1802. Then Callender, disappointed in his treatment by Jefferson, turned against him and loosed his talent for spreading scandal and personal abuse. The charges were of two types. "Dusky Sally" was taken up again; this time she was supposed to have accompanied Jefferson to France in 1794 and her eldest son Tom was said to bear "a striking though sable resemblance" to Jefferson. The paternity of a slave girl whom Jefferson freed and sent away from Monticello was also ascribed to him. Callender called upon the Republicans to choose another leader than this Jefferson who had produced his proportion of five mulattoes in Virginia. The second allegation was that Jefferson had made love to the wife of his friend and neighbor, John Walker. The lady was reported to have spurned his advances. The case continued to be a matter of public discussion for several years. *Richmond Recorder*, Sept. 1-Dec. 31, 1802, *passim*. See Maude H. Woodfin, "Contemporary Opinion in Virginia of Thomas Jefferson," in Avery Craven, ed., *Essays in Honor of William E. Dodd* (Chicago, 1935), 63-68; also Malone, 153-155.

⁸⁶ *Virginia Gazette, and General Advertiser*, Sept. 30, 1800, reprinting "Brutus" from the *Baltimore Federal Gazette*.

to the satisfaction of his opponents by the claim that in 1781 he fled before a small number of British troops under Tarleton, abandoning "his office and his trust, at the most critical moment."⁸⁷ This point the anti-Jefferson writers were able to put to a double use: they could base a charge of cowardice and a denunciation of Jefferson as an inefficient executive on the same incident:

In his own state, where he was Governor, at the time of the invasion by British troops, in 1781, his immediate fellow-citizens are the best judges of his conduct; and many of them complain that he did not, in that emergency, draw out the resources of the state, and oppose the enemy with the energy proportioned to the occasion; . . .⁸⁸

It is patent that many of the charges against Jefferson contradict themselves. This is not a fatal flaw in a well-run campaign of defamation, for different accusations are designed to reach different groups and are calculated to produce a desired reaction in terms of the particular prejudices of each one. However, perhaps the final irony in the complex pattern of this strange campaign is Hamilton's indictment of Jefferson as weak, vacillating, and hesitating. The anti-Jefferson group had done everything they could to picture Jefferson as a cold-hearted, remorseless schemer, busily plotting the destruction of everything worthwhile that the Federalists had built up. But when Hamilton, in January, 1801, was forced to choose between Jefferson and Burr, he found his reason for preferring the former in Jefferson's supposed weakness:

Nor is it true that Jefferson is zealot enough to do anything in pursuance of his principles which will contravene his popularity or his interest. He is as likely as any man I know to temporize. . . .⁸⁹

Thus had the pattern changed!

⁸⁷ *Address to the Citizens of South Carolina*, 10. For a detailed refutation of this charge, see the *Address to the People of the United States*, 11-13.

⁸⁸ *Address to the Citizens of South Carolina*, 10. The verdict of present-day scholarship on Jefferson's governorship is given in Malone, 301-396, and Marie Kimball, *Jefferson: War and Peace*, chs. III, V.

⁸⁹ Hamilton to Bayard, Jan. 16, 1801, *Works of Hamilton*, VI, 420. Sedgewick had said the same thing. Sedgewick to Hamilton, Jan. 10, 1801, *ibid.*, VI, 511-514. Earlier in the letter to Bayard Hamilton had recited the catalogue of Jefferson's sins: "I admit that his politics are tinctured with fanaticism; that he is too much in earnest with his democracy; that he has been a mischievous enemy to the principal measures of our past administrations; that he is crafty and persevering in his objects; that he is not scrupulous about the means of success, nor very mindful of truth, and that he is a contemptible hypocrite."

Mention must be made of the false rumor of Jefferson's death which circulated widely during the first days of July. Although published first on June 30 in the *Baltimore American*, a Jeffersonian journal, and accompanied by an editorial admonition that the report was probably false, it spread rapidly. Federalist organs printed it with scarcely concealed glee; Jeffersonian journals challenged its veracity.⁹⁰ The story was exposed as false on July 5 when the *Gazette of the United States* and the *American Daily Advertiser* published proof that Jefferson was alive. The truth of the matter was quite simple: a Thomas Jefferson had indeed died, but he was an old slave at Monticello who bore the same name as his master!⁹¹

VIII

"GREAT GOD OF COMPASSION AND JUSTICE, SHIELD MY COUNTRY FROM DESTRUCTION."⁹² With these words "Burleigh" concluded his series of essays in the *Connecticut Courant*, and they may be said fairly to epitomize the general atmosphere which the smear campaign against Jefferson was designed to create. The prevailing note was one of hysteria, and a vicious pattern of misrepresentation, falsehood, and irresponsible accusation was maintained throughout.

There is no doubt that the ferocity of the attacks upon Jefferson grew to some extent from a sincere conviction that he was unfit for the office of President, and that the charges made had some basis in fact. There were many who were persuaded that Jefferson was indeed an atheist and a revolutionary and who felt that his election would bring about the predicted chaos. To these a lesser share of blame for the campaign by defamation may be attached, for if they actively worked for his defeat by spreading slander and rumors, they have as justification that they were at least acting according to their convictions.

No such mild judgment may be passed upon the publicists who with no higher motive than safeguarding the election of the Federalist candidate entered lightheartedly upon the task of destroying Jefferson's reputation. In the struggle for political power and for the preservation of what they deemed vital interests, they made full use of highly explosive weapons. These were no light offenses of which they were accusing Jefferson. To term a man atheist and an enemy to religion was to provoke a storm of

⁹⁰ Charles Warren, *Odd Byways in American History* (Cambridge, 1942), ch. VII.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 132.

⁹² *Connecticut Courant*, Oct. 9, 1800.

fear among the godly, such a man as President would endanger the soul of every citizen; to call Jefferson a "Jacobin" and a "revolutionary" was to evoke the same psychological reactions that are produced today by the epithet "communist." Doing this, all the while knowing full well that the charges were false, the Federalist propagandists stand convicted of the most shameless political chicanery.

There was a great expenditure of time, effort, and money in the campaign to destroy Jefferson's character, and yet it could scarcely be called successful. His election was accomplished and the course of his administration gave the lie to "Burleigh" and the other prophets of doom. No churches were burned, nobody was murdered, raped, or seduced for political reasons, and the general pattern of life resembled pre-1800 America, not France of the Terror. The Federalists kept up a running fire against Jefferson during and after his entire term of office, yet a glance at the election statistics for the six administrations following 1800 testifies to their astonishing lack of success. What conclusions can be reached about the efficacy of mud slinging in political campaigns?

Based upon the experience of 1800 and of later campaigns of the same sort, it seems highly questionable whether the smear is ever effective in determining the outcome of a presidential election. The merciless treatment of Jefferson failed to halt the impending party revolution. Personal vilification has never stopped the long-range trends of American political development. The indiscriminate use of personal abuse is far more likely to boomerang. In this case the publication and dissemination of the anti-Jefferson propaganda brought about a counter-campaign; and since the Federalists had more vulnerable spots in their record (if for no other reason than that they had been in power for twelve years), the anti-Federalist attacks were far more effective. The chief result of the smear would appear to be an overall lowering of the tone of the campaign. It is doubtful whether any national election has been won by reliance on slander alone, although it is not difficult to find instances where indiscriminate use of propaganda has cost a candidate the victory.

The writer has long been convinced that most professional politicians underestimate the political sophistication of the American people. While manipulation of the electorate is feasible under special circumstances and for limited periods, it is not possible in a national election to change the mind of the voters on any broad scale. Lincoln's "you can't fool all of the people all of the time" comes to mind in this connection. In the election of

1800 the Federalists, assuming the venality and stupidity of men, had worked out anti-Jefferson propaganda approaches to each group in the population, and they had counted upon a predictable response to each stimulus provided. Their plans collapsed when the electorate simply did not react according to calculation. Instead of responding to appeals to superstition, greed, hysteria or class consciousness, the decision of the country was made in terms of the judgment of the people on the issues. The result of this election should not be interpreted to mean that the judgment of the electorate is always well informed or intelligent, or that a smear campaign is without effect. However, the effectiveness is limited and usually without great significance in the final result.

One success the anti-Jefferson propagandists had: they succeeded in damaging Jefferson's reputation so badly that many of their charges linger today. Historians still wrangle over Jefferson's administrative efficiency; there are strong and contradictory opinions as to whether he was a thorough-going disciple of French philosophy; the exact nature of his religious beliefs is still a matter of controversy. The damage done by a smear attack always extends beyond the particular struggle for office of which it is a part. The evil that men do does indeed live after them.

One final fact must be taken into account: campaigns of slander and abuse are always in danger of running into the phenomenon of the "sympathy vote." The voting public has a rough code of ethics, and as soon as the propaganda transgresses what the people feel are the bounds of fair play, a reaction sets in. It is a demonstrable fact that Jefferson gained many votes through the excesses of his opponents. This is an ever-present possibility, for smear campaigns, although fatally easy to start, are difficult to keep within limits and virtually impossible to stop.

There is a moral in this for 1948. Uncontrolled abuse does not win an election; instead it may very easily lose it. Far better, then, not to sling mud. It is only too obvious that issues of vital importance abound; why waste time and money by dabbling in personalities?