

Thomas Jefferson on Politics & Government

No one could say it better than the third President of the United States THOMAS JEFFERSON may he rest in peace.

Freedom of the Press

A press that is free to investigate and criticize the government is absolutely essential in a nation that practices self-government and is therefore dependent on an educated and enlightened citizenry. On the other hand, newspapers too often take advantage of their freedom and publish lies and scurrilous gossip that could only deceive and mislead the people. Jefferson himself suffered greatly under the latter kind of press during his presidency. But he was a great believer in the ultimate triumph of truth in the free marketplace of ideas, and looked to that for his final vindication.

"The basis of our governments being the opinion of the people, the very first object should be to keep that right; and were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter. But I should mean that every man should receive those papers and be capable of reading them." --Thomas Jefferson to Edward Carrington, 1787. ME 6:57

"The press [is] the only tocsin of a nation. [When it] is completely silenced... all means of a general effort [are] taken away." --Thomas Jefferson to Thomas Cooper, Nov 29, 1802. (*) ME 10:341

"The only security of all is in a free press. The force of public opinion cannot be resisted when permitted freely to be expressed. The agitation it produces must be submitted to. It is necessary, to keep the waters pure." --Thomas Jefferson to Lafayette, 1823. ME 15:491

"The functionaries of every government have propensities to command at will the liberty and property of their constituents. There is no safe deposit for these but with the people themselves, nor can they be safe with them without information. Where the press is free, and every man able to read, all is safe." --Thomas Jefferson to Charles Yancey, 1816. ME 14:384

"The most effectual engines for [pacifying a nation] are the public papers... [A despotic] government always [keeps] a kind of standing army of newswriters who, without any regard to truth or to what should be like truth, [invent] and put into the papers whatever might serve the ministers. This suffices with the mass of the people who have no means of distinguishing the false from the true paragraphs

of a newspaper." --Thomas Jefferson to G. K. van Hogendorp, Oct. 13, 1785. (*) ME 5:181, Papers 8:632

"Our liberty cannot be guarded but by the freedom of the press, nor that be limited without danger of losing it." --Thomas Jefferson to John Jay, 1786.

"I am... for freedom of the press, and against all violations of the Constitution to silence by force and not by reason the complaints or criticisms, just or unjust, of our citizens against the conduct of their agents." --Thomas Jefferson to Elbridge Gerry, 1799. ME 10:78

"The art of printing secures us against the retrogradation of reason and information." --Thomas Jefferson to Pierre Paganel, 1811. ME 13:37

"The light which has been shed on mankind by the art of printing has eminently changed the condition of the world... And while printing is preserved, it can no more recede than the sun return on his course." --Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, 1823. ME 15:465

"The art of printing alone and the vast dissemination of books will maintain the mind where it is and raise the conquering ruffians to the level of the conquered instead of degrading these to that of their conquerors." --Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, 1821. ME 15:334

"[The] literati [of Europe are] half a dozen years before us. Books, really good, acquire just reputation in that time, and so become known to us and communicate to us all their advances in knowledge. Is not this delay compensated by our being placed out of the reach of that swarm of nonsensical publications which issues daily from a thousand presses and perishes almost in issuing?" --Thomas Jefferson to Charles Bellini, 1785. ME 5:153, Papers 8:569

"I cannot live without books." --Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, 1815. ME 14:301

"To preserve the freedom of the human mind... and freedom of the press, every spirit should be ready to devote itself to martyrdom; for as long as we may think as we will and speak as we think, the condition of man will proceed in improvement." Thomas Jefferson to William Green Munford, 1799.

"No experiment can be more interesting than that we are now trying, and which we trust will end in establishing the fact, that man may be governed by reason and truth. Our first object should therefore be, to leave open to him all the avenues to truth. The most effectual hitherto found, is the freedom of the press. It is, therefore, the first shut up by those who fear the investigation of their actions." -- Thomas Jefferson to John Tyler, 1804. ME 11:33

"Weighing all probabilities of expense as well as of income, there is reasonable ground of confidence that we may now safely dispense with... the postage on newspapers... to facilitate the progress of information." --Thomas Jefferson: 1st Annual Message, 1801. ME 3:331

The Press as Censor

"No government ought to be without censors, and where the press is free, no one ever will. If virtuous, it need not fear the fair operation of attack and defence. Nature has given to man no other means of sifting out the truth whether in religion, law or politics. I think it as honorable to the government neither to know nor notice its sycophants or censors, as it would be undignified and criminal to pamper the former and persecute the latter." --Thomas Jefferson to George Washington, 1792. ME 8:406

"This formidable censor of the public functionaries, by arraigning them at the tribunal of public opinion, produces reform peaceably, which must otherwise be done by revolution. It is also the best instrument for enlightening the mind of man and improving him as a rational, moral, and social being." --Thomas Jefferson to A. Coray, 1823. ME 15:489

"I think an editor should be independent, that is, of personal influence, and not be moved from his opinions on the mere authority of any individual. But, with respect to the general opinion of the political section with which he habitually accords, his duty seems very like that of a member of Congress. Some of these indeed think that independence requires them to follow always their own opinion, without respect for that of others. This has never been my opinion, nor my practice, when I have been of that or any other body. Differing on a particular question from those whom I knew to be of the same political principles with myself, and with whom I generally thought and acted, a consciousness of the fallibility of the human mind, and of my own in particular, with a respect for the accumulated judgment of my friends, has induced me to suspect erroneous impressions in myself, to suppose my own opinion wrong, and to act with them on theirs." --Thomas Jefferson to William Duane, 1811. ME 13:49

"To demand the censors of public measures to be given up for punishment is to renew the demand of the wolves in the fable, that the sheep should give up their dogs as hostages of the peace and confidence established between them." --Thomas Jefferson to William Branch Giles, 1794.

Responsibility to the People

"Our citizens may be deceived for awhile, and have been deceived; but as long as the presses can be protected, we may trust to them for light." --Thomas Jefferson to Archibald Stuart. 1799.

"I am persuaded that the good sense of the people will always be found to be the best army. They

may be led astray for a moment, but will soon correct themselves. The people are the only censors of their governors, and even their errors will tend to keep these to the true principles of their institution. To punish these errors too severely would be to suppress the only safeguard of the public liberty. The way to prevent these irregular interpositions of the people is to give them full information of their affairs through the channel of the public papers, and to contrive that those papers should penetrate the whole mass of the people." --Thomas Jefferson to Edward Carrington, 1787.

"Cherish... the spirit of our people, and keep alive their attention. Do not be too severe upon their errors, but reclaim them by enlightening them." --Thomas Jefferson to Edward Carrington, 1787. ME 6:58

Restrictions on a Free Press

"Considering [the] great importance to the public liberty [of the freedom of the press], and the difficulty of submitting it to very precise rules, the laws have thought it less mischievous to give greater scope to its freedom than to the restraint of it." --Thomas Jefferson to the Spanish Commissioners, 1793. ME 9:165

"It is so difficult to draw a clear line of separation between the abuse and the wholesome use of the press, that as yet we have found it better to trust the public judgment, rather than the magistrate, with the discrimination between truth and falsehood. And hitherto the public judgment has performed that office with wonderful correctness." --Thomas Jefferson to M. Pictet, 1803. ME 10:356

"[This is] a country which is afraid to read nothing, and which may be trusted with anything, so long as its reason remains unfettered by law." --Thomas Jefferson to Joseph Milligan, 1816. ME 14:463

"[If a book were] very innocent, and one which might be confided to the reason of any man; not likely to be much read if let alone, but if persecuted, it will be generally read. Every man in the United States will think it a duty to buy a copy, in vindication of his right to buy and to read what he pleases." --Thomas Jefferson to N. G. Dufief, 1814. ME 14:128

"A declaration that the Federal Government will never restrain the presses from printing anything they please will not take away the liability of the printers for false facts printed." --Thomas Jefferson to James Madison, 1788. ME 7:98

"Printing presses shall be free except as to false facts published maliciously either to injure the reputation of another (whether followed by pecuniary damages or not) or to expose him to the punishment of the law." --Thomas Jefferson: Notes for a Constitution, 1794.

"Printing presses shall be subject to no other restraint than liableness to legal prosecution for false facts printed and published." --Thomas Jefferson: Draft of Virginia Constitution, 1783. ME 2:298, Papers 6:304

"Since truth and reason have maintained their ground against false opinions in league with false facts, the press confined to truth needs no other legal restraint. The public judgment will correct false reasonings and opinions on a full hearing of all parties, and no other definite line can be drawn between the inestimable liberty of the press and its demoralizing licentiousness. If there be still improprieties which this rule would not restrain, its supplement must be sought in the censorship of public opinion." --Thomas Jefferson: 2nd Inaugural Address, 1805. ME 3:381

Restraints Against Slander

"The States... retain to themselves the right of judging how far the licentiousness of speech and of the press may be abridged without lessening their useful freedom, and how far those abuses which cannot be separated from their use should be tolerated rather than the use be destroyed." --Thomas Jefferson: Draft of Kentucky Resolutions, 1798. ME 17:381

"The power to [restrain slander] is fully possessed by the several State Legislatures. It was reserved to them, and was denied to the General Government, by the Constitution, according to our construction of it. While we deny that Congress have a right to control the freedom of the press, we have ever asserted the right of the States, and their exclusive right, to do so. They have accordingly all of them made provisions for punishing slander which those who have time and inclination resort to for the vindication of their characters. In general, the state laws appear to have made the presses responsible for slander as far as is consistent with their useful freedom. In those states where they do not admit even the truth of allegations to protect the printer they have gone too far." --Thomas Jefferson to Abigail Adams, 1804. ME 11:51

"No inference is here intended that the laws provided by the State against false and defamatory publications should not be enforced; he who has time renders a service to public morals and public tranquility in reforming these abuses by the salutary coercions of the law." --Thomas Jefferson: 2nd Inaugural Address, 1805. ME 3:381

"While a full range is proper for actions by individuals either private or public for slanders affecting them, I would wish much to see the experiment tried of getting along without public prosecutions for libels. I believe we can do it. Patience and well-doing instead of punishment, if it can be found sufficiently efficacious, would be a happy change in the instruments of government." --Thomas Jefferson to Levi Lincoln, 1802.

Abuses by a Free Press

"I deplore... the putrid state into which our newspapers have passed and the malignity, the vulgarity, and mendacious spirit of those who write for them... These ordures are rapidly depraving the public taste and lessening its relish for sound food. As vehicles of information and a curb on our functionaries, they have rendered themselves useless by forfeiting all title to belief... This has, in a great degree, been produced by the violence and malignity of party spirit." --Thomas Jefferson to Walter Jones, 1814. ME 14:46

"Our printers raven on the agonies of their victims, as wolves do on the blood of the lamb." --Thomas Jefferson to James Monroe, 1811. ME 13:59

"From forty years' experience of the wretched guess-work of the newspapers of what is not done in open daylight, and of their falsehood even as to that, I rarely think them worth reading, and almost never worth notice." --Thomas Jefferson to James Monroe, 1816. ME 14:430

"Nothing can now be believed which is seen in a newspaper. Truth itself becomes suspicious by being put into that polluted vehicle. The real extent of this state of misinformation is known only to those who are in situations to confront facts within their knowledge with the lies of the day." --Thomas Jefferson to John Norvell, 1807. ME 11:224

"As for what is not true, you will always find abundance in the newspapers." --Thomas Jefferson to Barnabas Bidwell, 1806. ME 11:118

"Advertisements... contain the only truths to be relied on in a newspaper." --Thomas Jefferson to Nathaniel Macon, 1819. ME 15:179

"The press is impotent when it abandons itself to falsehood." --Thomas Jefferson to Thomas Seymour, 1807.

Sowing Dissension

"A coalition of sentiments is not for the interest of printers. They, like the clergy, live by the zeal they can kindle and the schisms they can create. It is contest of opinion in politics as well as religion which makes us take great interest in them and bestow our money liberally on those who furnish aliment to our appetite... So the printers can never leave us in a state of perfect rest and union of opinion. They would be no longer useful and would have to go to the plough." --Thomas Jefferson to Elbridge Gerry, 1801. ME 10:254

"These people [i.e., the printers] think they have a right to everything, however secret or sacred." -- Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, 1815. ME 14:345

"To divide those by lying tales whom truths cannot divide, is the hackneyed policy of the gossips of every society." --Thomas Jefferson to George Clinton, 1803. ME 10:440

"[We] have seen too much... of the conduct of the press in countries where it is free, to consider the gazettes as evidence of the sentiments of any part of the government; [we] have seen them bestow on the government itself, in all its parts, its full share of inculpation." --Thomas Jefferson to George Hammond, 1792. ME 8:300

"Nations, like individuals, wish to enjoy a fair reputation. It is therefore desirable for us that the slanders on our country, disseminated by hired or prejudiced travellers, should be corrected." -- Thomas Jefferson to James Ogilvie, 1811. ME 13:69

"Our new