

Jefferson's Call for Nationhood

Sample Pages

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Introduction

Late in the morning of March 4, 1801, the tall, fair, and conspicuously informal Virginian walked several hundred yards from his lodgings to mount the steps of the unfinished Capitol. Accompanied by a small but impressive parade of militia officers, Thomas Jefferson made his way to the Senate chamber dressed, as Henry Adams recounted, as “a plain citizen, without any distinctive badge of office.” The president-elect was received by approximately a thousand supporters, congressmen, and the curious, most of whom had no chance of actually hearing the soft-spoken leader of the Republican Party. Greeting him, too, were Aaron Burr, who had been sworn in as vice president earlier that morning, and John Marshall, the dour Chief Justice whose task this day was to administer to his Republican relative the oath of office. It was a trio gathered out of obligation alone, and now, as Adams put it, “the assembled senators looked up at three men who profoundly disliked and distrusted each other.”¹

The words Jefferson spoke that day may have done little to dispel personal resentments, but when he finished the nation knew itself to have witnessed a masterpiece. At 1716 words, forty-one sentences, and seven paragraphs the address did not take long to deliver; indeed no student of Jefferson’s rhetorical art would have expected otherwise. In its “language, its perspicuity, its arrangement, its felicity of thought and expression,” wrote one observer, the inaugural address was “a model of eloquence,” a virtuoso performance by “one of the best writers which our country has produced.” The principles Jefferson enshrined that day, reported the *Independent Chronicle*, were “compressed within such precise limits, as to enforce them on the memory, and expressed with such classical elegance, as to charm the scholar with their rhetorical

brilliance.” News of the address soon traveled to distant ports, where French supporters in particular welcomed its universal message of conciliation, peace, and republican virtue. “Your message,” Pierre Samuel DuPont Nemour declared to Jefferson, “like all your thoughts and writings, is full of wisdom, judgment, and illumination, and contains a divine moral.” Jefferson himself, characteristically modest, hoped that the address “will present the leading objects to be conciliation and adherence to sound principle.” History records the speaker to have succeeded.²

Widely celebrated in its own time, the first inaugural address continues to command the regard of Americans from across the political spectrum. And for much the same reason: it took as its task the subordination of local and temporary interests to the general and abiding principles of republican government. In 1837, George Tucker observed the distinctive manner in which Jefferson’s boldness was tempered by that quality of refined understatement we have come to attach to most of his writings. “Though couched in language of humility, and breathing the spirit of benevolence and liberality,” Tucker wrote, the address nevertheless “asserts all the cardinal principles of the republican faith, but in such general terms as not to alarm the fears or irritate the prejudices of his opponents.” More than half a century after its delivery, Henry Randall found the circulation of its maxims in the press and popular letters to be “astonishing, and perhaps unequaled in the instance of any similar production.”³

By the twentieth century, far removed from the bitter party struggles and uncertainties from which it emerged and to which it immediately spoke, the address was fully enshrined into the canonical literature of American nationhood. To the populist Tom Watson, Jefferson’s speech “will always be to good government what the Sermon on the Mount is to religion,” and Woodrow Wilson noted, “Nothing could exceed the fine tact and gentleness with which Mr. Jefferson gave tone of order and patriotic purpose in his inaugural address to the new way of government his followers expected of him.” Fawn Brodie judged the address to be “one of the great seminal papers in American political history,” indeed of “almost Biblical impact.” Jefferson’s masterpiece stands to-

day, in the word of the distinguished Jefferson scholar Peter Onuf, as “one of the great texts in the American libertarian tradition, a blast against ‘political intolerance and persecution.’”⁴

The significance, stature, and abiding appeal of Jefferson’s inaugural address is now universally acknowledged; how curious, then, that it has yet to receive sustained and systematic analysis. This book represents an attempt to initiate that process. I offer it as an introduction to those who are interested in Jefferson and the address in particular but who may not have found occasion to dwell on its origins, composition, meaning, and delivery. Drawing both from primary historical sources and the rich scholarship on Jefferson, I set in place relevant contextual information and submit the text to a series of detailed interpretations. The result, I hope, is to make available a resource for those wishing to enrich their understanding of the address, feature it for classroom discussion, and further their pursuits into the Jeffersonian legacy.

What follows will soon enough announce its own limitations. If nothing else, an entire book—even so slender a volume as this—on such a brief speech will inevitably draw unfavorable comparisons between the felicity of its subject and that of the author. That is fair. My only excuse rests in the conviction that Jefferson’s text will reward the effort, that it is so artistically wrought, so culturally resonant and compelling as to justify the attempt. There is, as well, the matter of situating what he says and what gets said about him in the corpus of Jeffersonian scholarship. That scholarship is, to put it mildly, extensive and endlessly suggestive of what might else be said of this or that issue. I have tried to invoke as much of this scholarship as is possible given my aims, argument, and constraints. Needless to say, that much is still but a tiny fraction of the whole. For those curious to explore Jefferson, his world, and his inaugural address at greater length, I have included a fairly extensive bibliography. Here, too, it should be acknowledged that it is necessarily selective; indeed, work now under way and soon to be published will inevitably add to or challenge some of the views contained here.

And then there is the vexed issue of Jefferson’s status in the pantheon of American founders, especially as it involves questions surrounding

his relationship to slavery. Recent revelations and disputes regarding Jefferson and Sally Hemings, dramatic as they are for many, represent only one aspect of a more general reassessment of the man and his legacy. Academic conferences, publically aired debates, books, exhibitions, and other forums of exchange continue to place Jefferson at the center of controversy. As Merrill Peterson made clear in *The Jefferson Image in the American Mind*, this preoccupation with the meaning, so to speak, of the third president is scarcely new; in fact it dates to his own life time and has seldom if ever abated. In treating at such length one of Jefferson's most important statements on the grounds and prospects of American liberty, I wish not to skirt the question as to how Jefferson could say the things he said even as he held several hundred human beings in bondage. In the old days, one might expect at this point the usual qualifiers: yes, but he treated them well; yes, but he once conceived a plan to eliminate the system; yes, but he was a man of his time and place; yes, but . . . Such protests no longer convince, if they ever did, and students of Jefferson tend now to confront the issue more openly. Dogged defense can still be heard, of course, as can sweeping condemnation. The more productive alternative, in my view, faces the fact of Jefferson's complicity in the benighted system, acknowledges the force and extent of his vision for an "empire of liberty," and sees the man as embodying some of the best and worst qualities of the American experience. At the same time, I have not for the purposes of this study centered the issue of slavery in my interpretation of the inaugural; to do so, it seemed to me, would be to simply repeat interminably that it was not conceived as applying to large numbers of inhabitants of the republic, among them African Americans of either gender, women of any "race," and Native Americans whatsoever. That is a very important thing to say and remember, but my hope is to say much more and many different things about this remarkable speech.⁵

That said, the following account is undertaken from a perspective broadly construed as rhetorical. By this I refer to a persistent interest in the ways language works to shape our understanding of the world and our relationship to it. To make sense of human action from this view is to emphasize the centrality of symbols in setting the horizons

and limits of life, especially as it is lived among others in the conduct of public affairs. Recent scholarship on the role of rhetoric in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century America reflects a similar set of interests: Jay Fliegelman's *Declaring Independence*, Sandra Gustafson's *Eloquence is Power*, Thomas Gustafson's *Representative Words*, Michael Warner's *The Letters of the Republic*, and other works have taught us much about the play of language in shaping the cultural life of the period. My study shares that concern generally and is indebted to this scholarship; at the same time, it differs by attending carefully and at considerable length to the interpretation of a single text. In this book, rhetoric refers to the artistic management of symbols and the cultural traditions from which they draw authority. If there is a lurking theoretical stance organizing the analysis, it is perhaps best captured in Aristotle's conception of rhetoric as "the ability, in each [particular] case, to see the available means of persuasion." There are many other useful definitions of the art, to be sure, but Aristotle's seems to grasp what I take to be central to our understanding of Jefferson and his speech. Above all, it draws attention to a particular kind of intelligence, a capacity to reason and speak effectively in the shifting contexts of political life. This faculty will be exercised best, Aristotle teaches us, when it is trained on the "available means of persuasion," the common store of knowledge and beliefs that in turn become instruments of persuasion.⁶

There are other ways of getting at Jefferson's particular genius, but this stress on rhetoric as the art of effective expression gives us the means to explain a great deal. In particular, it leads us to ask after the interplay of arguments, appeals, and imagery that make up the address; stresses its pragmatic and instrumental character; and invites us to attend to the complex field of operations within which the text embeds itself. As with any trained perspective, this focus on the rhetorical dimensions of Jefferson's address will perforce leave out much; on the other hand, it gives us an opportunity to examine at close range the distinctive achievement of the speech as an act of public persuasion.

The guiding assumption behind the analysis and design of this book is that the first inaugural address is best read not through one but several

lenses. Each orientation allows us to rotate our object, prismlike, in order to see its multiple facets, to set it within different contexts and ask different questions as to its sources, meaning, and implications. Our general approach, again, is rhetorical; that is, we will examine the text with a sharp eye for the strategic deployment of arguments, appeals, and imagery. This mode of interpretation allows us to assemble under its auspices diverse but interdependent orientations. These orientations respectively situate the text as (1) a partisan act, the chief function of which is to announce in the most compelling terms possible the victory of the Republicans over and against their Federalist opponents; (2) a statement of political theory, the chief function of which is to re-establish the first principles of republican government; and (3) a rhetorical performance, the chief function of which is to give to both these partisan and theoretical aims their optimal expression. A brief summary of each will help set our coordinates for the chapters that follow. The chapter analyses take as their point of departure certain problems for the student of Jefferson; rather than sweep these under the rug, I have chosen to feature them as interesting in their own right and essential to our understanding of the first inaugural address.

With respect to the partisan ambitions at work in the address, we are confronted immediately with Jefferson's long-held convictions about the dangers of party. Like virtually everyone in the eighteenth century, Jefferson loathed the very idea of party, and he spent the decade preceding his election lambasting those who he claimed were subverting legitimate government through partisan maneuvering. "If I could not go to heaven but with a party," he once declared, "I would not go there at all." The record is not clear on how things finally turned out for the deistic Jefferson on this score, but it is very clear that he in fact was largely responsible for the development and success of America's first great opposition party. The inaugural address itself can plausibly be read as a veritable manifesto of the Republican creed, the single most powerful and eloquent statement ever rendered on behalf of an organized political agenda. Was Jefferson, as his many critics charged, a hypocrite? Deluded? Did he manage somehow to transcend the very political realities that elevated him to the executive office? I

leave that to the reader to decide, but offer in chapter one a basis on which to think through the question.⁷

When it comes to discussing Jefferson's text as a political treatise we find ourselves on no less tenuous grounds. The problem is not that we are dealing with a speech rather than a philosophical tome: we have only to think of Edmund Burke to recognize that the two genres are not necessarily incommensurable. No, the problem rests in thinking of Jefferson as a "philosophical" thinker (as we would now say—in his time philosophy referred to natural science) in the first place: he claimed no such status, was seldom original and often slippery when it came to systematic reflection on ideas and theoretical precepts. If there is theory at work in Jefferson's pronouncements it was of the axiomatic kind. His was the faculty, as Charles Francis Adams wrote, "of leading the many, by impressing their minds with happily concentrated propositions." At the same time, we cannot miss in his thought a structure of ideas and ideals that ordered his public statements in ways not arbitrary, not just the clutching of truisms in the face of political need. The first inaugural address rather is notable precisely for its elegant distillation of something very like a public philosophy, the terms and appeal of which no one was better suited to express than the Sage of Monticello. In chapter two, I suggest that, squinted at in the right light, Jefferson's text can be usefully read as the production of a serious and accomplished thinker. He may have been no Montesquieu, no Rousseau, not even an Adams; but he was, unlike these more reflective figures, a theorist of formidable popular appeal.⁸

There is, finally, the matter of Jefferson's place in the rhetorical culture of late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth-century America. Again, the case against locating him there in any prominent way is not too difficult to launch. Jefferson was, by his own reckoning and by consensus, no orator. That station was the rightful claim of Patrick Henry, Richard Henry Lee, and Sam Adams. Jefferson, by marked contrast, was reticent to a fault, abhorred debate and verbal contest, and possessed a skin as thin as any president before or since. But perhaps we need another way of looking at the question, assistance for which we can turn to Jefferson's friend and rival John Adams. "Eloquence in

public assemblies is not the surest road to fame and preferment," Adams noted, "unless it be used with caution, very rarely, and with great reserve." Adams, for whom caution and reserve were fleeting indeed, reasoned that "the examples of Washington, Franklin, and Jefferson, are enough to show that silence and reserve in public, are more efficacious than argumentation and oratory." That may be overstating the case a bit, but it does suggest that we need to rethink our terms when explaining the rhetorical culture of Jefferson's day. If, as I argue in chapter three, his inaugural address reached the heights of eloquence, then we are required to identify expectations and apply standards appropriate not to a Patrick Henry but to Jefferson and the ideals for which he stood.⁹

The partisan, the theoretical, and the oratorical are, it is important to stress, intractably related, and I have no wish to pose differences where none belong. To the contrary, I hope to show that by looking at Jefferson's inaugural address in these ways, we can discern a good deal of its multiform textures, its alternating energies and protean shapes. Together, the partisan, philosophical, and rhetorical dimensions of the speech work together to create what is rightfully judged among the greatest achievements of our republican legacy.

A few words, finally, about the labor required in reading the pages ahead. Jefferson's address, as previously noted, has yet to be analyzed with the detail it invites. Historians have provided us with a wealth of contextual information, and have said many useful things about the speech. I have drawn heavily and gratefully from their work. But as to the painstaking process of interpreting the text line by line—sometimes word by word—that is the business of this book, and it will require no small amount of patience. The challenge is compounded by the brevity of the text, and in submitting it to three levels of interpretation, the dangers of redundancy seem at times inescapable. For this I must apologize in advance to the reader and ask for more than the usual indulgence accorded textual critics. By way of mitigating some of the problem, I seek to locate the speech in its relevant political, theoretical, and rhetorical contexts; typically, I have tried to balance each chapter by devoting about half its pages to such contextual determinants and the other half to the speech itself. This too runs a certain danger: why, it

may be asked, must we wade through so much extraneous material to get to the real goods? At this point I can only assure the reader that such considerations are not in fact extraneous but key to a fuller grasp of the object. Rhetorical texts, especially one so crafted as Jefferson's, reward sustained attention to their internal dynamics; at the same time, they take on their full meaning and force because they are responses to and projections of prevailing historical and situational factors. Ideally, we seek to have it both ways: to appreciate the singularity of Jefferson's production and its function within broader cultural contexts.