Robert J. Smith, III

Dr. Ran Henry

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Principles and Character in the Face of Uncertainty: Thomas Jefferson’s Flight to Poplar Forest in 1781

Did Thomas Jefferson drop the reins and abandon his post as Governor of Virginia when he retreated to Poplar Forest instead of following the Assembly to Staunton? Individuals such as Delegate George Nicholas and unnamed others in the legislature seem to have thought so when they opened an inquiry on Jefferson’s actions as governor. They were exasperated with the apparent vulnerability Virginia had to contend with in the latter days of the Revolutionary War. Richmond, the nonesuch place of John Smith’s dreams and William Byrd’s schemes, fell victim to British depredations in January 1781 despite the best designs of the Assembly and the governor. Both the executive and legislative components of government were on the run, seeking refuge from the hands of that notorious turncoat Benedict Arnold. Jefferson’s departure from office was caught in the turbulence of those months on the run when the Assembly itself could not always meet and make progress on pending matters – including Jefferson’s replacement as governor. His contemporaries may have seen it as an abrupt move, but it was not necessarily so.

Jefferson noticeably does not touch on the closing months of his final gubernatorial term in his autobiography; he does not even acknowledge his post at the head of his beloved Commonwealth on his tombstone, a monument he wanted to serve to proclaim his proudest accomplishments. The retreat to Poplar Forest did much to tarnish his reputation, but the events surrounding his public life at the time deserve greater inspection if not to judge then to better appreciate and understand his character.

Jefferson did relinquish power in the middle of a crisis for better or for worse. The General Assembly commenced an inquiry into his actions as governor not long after he vacated the post and they had scattered from Charlottesville steps ahead of Tarleton. Virginia already felt the strain on military resources when contemplating defense of its home turf; in 1780, Jefferson and the General Assembly again enacted annual legislation to quickly recruit able bodies to send to the Continental Army in the number of 3,000 through the end of 1781. General Clinton’s movements had ensured that a majority would route northward for service and thereby leaving Virginia vulnerable; aside from militia, Virginia was virtually unguarded (Jefferson, 2 July 1780). Jefferson pursued legislative remedies to his lack of authority to enforce the calling of militia, a problem that plagued the state during the raids of 1781 (Jefferson, 28 May 1781). Moreover, the inquiry, as drafted, intended to address actions by a body of individuals entrusted with administration of the executive branch, including the Council of State, instead of just the governor. The Council had seen several resignations submitted to Jefferson in the months leading up to the end of his final gubernatorial term; the letters lack specificity, but they suggest possible disfunction in that body. Jefferson interpreted his powers as flowing from the recommendations of the Council; he would not permit himself to act on his own unless the advice of the Council was unavailable (Verell, 2022). Ultimately, the committee did not exhibit charges officially and dropped the matter, exonerating Jefferson in December 1781 when he appeared before the body to answer any charges and clear his name (Journal of the House of Delegates, 12 December 1781).

The investigation into his conduct did not reveal causation for his abrupt departure from his expired post and retreat into family life. When Jefferson departed Monticello on June 4, 1781, two days after the conclusion of his term as governor, he fled with his family. His wife was not in good health, and the escape from Richmond in January had weakened a daughter, Lucy Elizabeth, who died in April 1781 (Verell, 2015). Grief burdened the family as they made their flight in early June. Knowing that he had recommended Thomas Nelson for appointment as the next governor and that the Assembly did not act, Jefferson made a choice to close out this chapter of his leadership and focus on the more important comfort of his family. His ailing wife bore another child, also named Lucy Elizabeth, in 1782 and never recovered, dying in September of that year.

Thomas Jefferson, father, statesman, founder, thinker, and great doer, brooded in the face of his personal losses that only sharpened under accusations of inadequacy as a wartime governor. “Your letter recalled to my memory that there were persons still living of much value to me” he wrote to friend Marquis de Chastellux, commenting further that he had entered “the arms of retirement, and rested all prospects of future happiness on domestic and literary objects” (Jefferson, 26 November 1782). He had been painfully aware of the dwindling time with his family as the British raids frustrated the governance of Virginia. He was ready to let go and seek refuge in the ways only he knew would help him heal. He also saw his involvement as a political leader defined and bounded by his circumstances. “There is a debt of service due from every man to his country, proportioned to the bounties which nature & fortune have measured to him” he wrote to Edward Rutledge in 1796. Here he acknowledged reasonable limitations to service; the British incursions into Virginia had taken a personal toll as well as a political one. In the same letter to Rutledge, he comments “I know well that no man will ever bring out of that office the reputation which carries him into it” (Jefferson, 27 December 1796). Thomas Jefferson was not unmindful of the reputation he carried and its effect on his success or failure as a leader. He abided by strongly held beliefs in his responsibility to family as well as his duty to not overextend the limitations on the power bestowed to him by his office. He did not extend his term of office when the Assembly failed to act in appointing a successor; he had already made his recommendation. Members of his Council of State, the advice of whom was necessary in carrying out his executive duties, had resigned from their terms on account of unspecified domestic obligations. Thomas Jefferson completed his defined term of service and adhered to his personal principles, and this is a clear sign that he was not a shirker of his responsibilities. He relinquished the reins of power when he fled to Poplar Forest, but the office was no longer his. When he was at last ready, he continued to serve and lead meaningfully as a debt to the county he helped form through trial and tribulation.

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I will not lie, cheat, or steal, nor will I tolerate those who do.

Robert James Smith, III

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