

Jefferson to Anne L. G. N. Stael-Holstein

Monticello, Sep. 6, 16

A request, dear Madam, in your letter of January the 6th, gives you the trouble of reading this. You therein ask information of the state of things in South America. This is difficult to be understood, even to us who have some stolen intercourse with those countries, but in Europe I suppose it is impossible. That mendacity which Spain, like England, makes a principal place in the machine of her Government confounds all inquiry, by so blending truth and falsehood as to make them indistinguishable. According to Spanish accounts, they have won great victories in battles which were never fought, and slaughtered thousands of rebels whom they have never seen: and as, in our revolution, the English were perpetually gaining victories over us, until they conquered themselves out of our Northern Continent, so Spain is in a fair way of conquering herself out of the Southern one.

Even our information of the state of things in the Spanish Colonies is far from being distinct or certain, so that I can give you but a general idea of it. To do this, we must throw that country into masses, considering Brazil as a nucleus around which they are dispersed:-

1. Buenos Ayres, and the country south of Brazil.
2. Chili, Tucumana, and Peru, west of Brazil, and on the Pacific Ocean.
3. Caraccas, and the country north of Brazil, on the Gulf of Mexico.
4. Mexico in the Northern Continent:-

1. Buenos Ayres has established its independence as the Spanish functionaries themselves admit. It was for some time embarrassed by the ambition of Monte Video, on the other side of La Plata, which claimed to be the principal place, and endeavored to maintain it by arms; but they have finally come to an arrangement, which has reunited them, and they have formed their regular Government. Spain, conscious that they are irrecoverable, is as we are told, bartering them with the Court of Brazil for Portugal. Whether Spain can court or conquer Portugal from hatred to love, you can best judge. The transfer of a people, like cattle with their soil, seems to be growing into a part of the jus gentium of Europe, but it is not likely to be received here, where we consider the cattle as owners of the soil. Surrounded as Brazil is with revolutionary countries and principles, and having at times participated in them, it is possible this may turn out to be a gift of Brazil to Buenos Ayres, instead of a transfer of Buenos Ayres to Brazil.

2. Chili, Tucumana, and Peru, at one time, were entirely ascendant: they have since suffered some reverses, and Buenos Ayres, we are told, is gone from their assistance. The mother country can do little on that coast.

3.The Caraccas are the most accessible to the arms of Spain, and there, accordingly, successes have been most diversified. The Patriots and Royalists have been victors and vanquished by turns: lately, the Patriots carried all before them; but now there is reason to believe they have suffered serious discomfiture; and it is here the most atrocious cruelties have been exercised. The Patriots have in vain endeavored to end them by examples of moderation: the Royalists answer them by examples of extermination. Yet, difficult as is the contest, this country, too, will ultimately be revolutionized.

4.Mexico. The Royalists still hold the city of Mexico and the port of Vera Cruz, the only one of that province, while it is understood that the Patriots will prevail over the country. The siege of Vera Cruz, now believed to have begun, or about to be begun, is supposed to be the cause why Apodaca, the new Viceroy of Mexico, who lately sailed for that port from Havanna, has been obliged to return, without venturing to land at Vera Cruz. This first of all the Spanish possessions, and superior to Spain itself in extent, fertility, population, riches, and information, has nothing to fear from the pigmy power of Spain.

So far, then, all would seem well; but their real difficulties are not how to repel the efforts of the mother country, but how to silence and disarm the schisms among themselves. In all those countries, the most inveterate divisions have arisen, partly among the different cases, partly among rival leaders; constitution after constitution is made and broken, and in the mean time everything is at the mercy of the military leaders. The whole Southern Continent is sunk in the deepest ignorance and bigotry; a single priest is more than a sufficient opponent to a whole army; and were it not that the lower clergy, as poor and oppressed as the people themselves, has very much taken side with the revolutionists, their cause would have been very desperate from the beginning; but when their independence shall be established, the same ignorance and bigotry will render them incapable of forming and maintaining a free Government; and it is excruciating to believe that all will end in military despotism under the Bonapartes of those regions.

The only comfortable prospect which this clouded horizon offers is, that these revolutionary movements having excited into exercise that common sense which nature has implanted in every one, it will go on advancing towards the lights of cultivated reason, will become sensible of its own powers, and in time be able to form some canons of freedom, and to restrain their leaders to an observance of them. In the mean time, we must pray to God, as most heartily as we do for your country, that "He will be pleased to give them patience under their sufferings, and a happy issue out of all their afflictions."

Your resolution not to revisit your own country, while under foreign force, is worthy of you. No patriotism requires us to incur the pain of witnessing the miseries which we cannot remedy or alleviate, and towards which, even in absence, your pen may do more than your presence. That such a country and such a people can never be kept permanently prostrate on the earth is a decree of Heaven, which will not pass away. Our great anxiety is, lest they should lengthen their sufferings by premature and abortive attempts to end them, and our wish that they may have patience yet awhile, until dissensions among their enemies may give them a choice of friends. In general it is sinful, but now pious, to pray for war and strife among nations, as the only means of dissolving their criminal combinations.

I congratulate you on the happy union of your daughter with a peer and patriot of France, and, should

your son realize the hope you hold up to us of visiting this sanctuary of the unfortunate of every country, where “the wolf dwells with the lamb, and the leopard with the kid,” he will be hailed as the son of Madame de Staël and grandson of M. Neeker, and will see an example, in the peaceable reunion here of so many discordant worthies of his own country, how much more happy the tolerant principles of his great ancestor might have made them at home.

Permit me here to renew the assurances of my high consideration and esteem.

Thomas Jefferson.

The logo for Thomas Jefferson Monticello, featuring a stylized cursive signature of "Th. Jefferson" above the word "MONTICELLO" in a serif font, all in white on a dark blue background.

Th. Jefferson
MONTICELLO