

Jefferson to John Adams

Dear Sir,

I have to acknowledge the receipt of your favor of November the 23d. The banks, bankrupt law, manufactures, Spanish treaty, are nothing. These are occurrences which, like waves in a storm will pass under the ship. But the Missouri question, is a breaker on which we lose the Missouri country by revolt, and what more, God only knows. From the battle of Bunker's Hill to the treaty of Paris, we never had so ominous a question. It even damps the joy with which I hear of your high health, and welcomes to me the consequences of my want of it. I thank God that I shall not live to witness its issue. Sed hæc hactenus.

I have been amusing myself latterly with reading the voluminous letters of Cicero. They certainly breathe the purest effusions of an exalted patriot, while the parricide Cæsar is lost in odious contrast. When the enthusiasm, however, kindled by Cicero's pen and principles, subsides into cool reflection, I ask myself, what was that government which the virtues of Cicero were so zealous to restore, and the ambition of Cæsar to subvert? And if Cæsar had been as virtuous as he was daring and sagacious, what could he, even in the plenitude of his usurped power, have done to lead his fellow citizens into good government? I do not say to restore it, because they never had it, from the rape of the Sabines to the ravages of the Cæsars. If their people indeed had been, like ourselves, enlightened, peaceable, and really free, the answer would be obvious. "Restore independence to all your foreign conquests, relieve Italy from the government of the rabble of Rome, consult it as a nation entitled to self-government, and do its will." But steeped in corruption, vice and venality, as the whole nation was, (and nobody had done more than Cæsar to corrupt it,) what could even Cicero, Cato, Brutus have done, had it been referred to them to establish a good government for their country? They had no ideas of government themselves, but of their degenerate Senate, nor the people of liberty, but of the factious opposition of their Tribunes. They had afterwards their Tituses, their Trajans and Antoninuses, who had the will to make them happy, and the power to mould their government into a good and permanent form. But it would seem as if they could not see their way clearly to do it. No government can continue good, but under the control of the people; and their people were so demoralized and depraved, as to be incapable of exercising a wholesome control. Their reformation then was to be taken up ab incunabulis. Their minds were to be informed by education what is right and what wrong; to be encouraged in habits of virtue, and deterred from those of vice by the dread of punishments, proportioned indeed, but irremissible; in all cases, to follow truth as the only safe guide, and to eschew error, which bewilders us in one false consequence after another, in endless succession. These are the inculcations necessary to render the people a sure basis for the structure of order and good government. But this would have been an operation of a generation or two, at least, within which period would have succeeded many Neros and Commoduses, who would have quashed the whole process. I confess then, I can neither see what Cicero, Cato, and Brutus, united and

uncontrolled, could have devised to lead their people into good government, nor how this enigma can be solved, nor how further shown why it has been the fate of that delightful country never to have known, to this day, and through a course of five and twenty hundred years, the history of which we possess, one single day of free and rational government. Your intimacy with their history, ancient, middle and modern, your familiarity with the improvements in the science of government at this time, will enable you, if any body, to go back with our principles and opinions to the times of Cicero, Cato, and Brutus, and tell us by what process these great and virtuous men could have led so unenlightened and vitiated a people into freedom and good government, et eris mihi magnus Apollo. Cura ut valeas, et tibi persuadeas carissimum te mihi esse.



Th. Jefferson
MONTICELLO