

Jefferson to Lafayette

It is long, indeed, my very dear friend, since I have been able to address a letter to you. For more than two years my health has been so entirely prostrate, that I have, of necessity, intermitted all correspondence. The dislocated wrist, too, which perhaps you may recollect, has now become so stiff from the effects of age, that writing is become a slow and painful operation, and scarcely ever undertaken but under the goad of imperious business. In the meantime your country has been going on less well than I had hoped. But it will go on. The light which has been shed on the mind of man through the civilized world, has given it a new direction, from which no human power can divert it. The sovereigns of Europe who are wise, or have wise counsellors, see this, and bend to the breeze which blows; the unwise alone stiffen and meet its inevitable crush. The volcanic rumblings in the bowels of Europe, from north to south, seem to threaten a general explosion, and the march of armies into Italy cannot end in a simple march. The disease of liberty is catching; those armies will take it in the south, carry it thence to their own country, spread there the infection of revolution and representative government, and raise its people from the prone condition of brutes to the erect altitude of man. Some fear our envelopment in the wars engendering from the unsettled state of our affairs with Spain, and therefore are anxious for a ratification of our treaty with her. I fear no such thing, and hope that if ratified by Spain it will be rejected here. We may justly say to Spain, "when this negotiation commenced, twenty years ago, your authority was acknowledged by those you are selling to us. That authority is now renounced, and their right of self-disposal asserted. In buying them from you, then, we buy but a war-title, a right to subdue them, which you can neither convey nor we acquire. This is a family quarrel in which we have no right to meddle. Settle it between yourselves, and we will then treat with the party whose right is acknowledged." With whom that will be, no doubt can be entertained. And why should we revolt them by purchasing them as cattle, rather than receiving them as fellow-men? Spain has held off until she sees they are lost to her, and now thinks it better to get something than nothing for them. When she shall see South America equally desperate, she will be wise to sell that also.

With us things are going on well. The boisterous sea of liberty indeed is never without a wave, and that from Missouri is now rolling towards us, but we shall ride over it as we have over all others. It is not a moral question, but one merely of power. Its object is to raise a geographical principle for the choice of a president, and the noise will be kept up till that is effected. All know that permitting the slaves of the south to spread into the west will not add one being to that unfortunate condition, that it will increase the happiness of those existing, and by spreading them over a larger surface, will dilute the evil everywhere, and facilitate the means of getting finally rid of it, an event more anxiously wished by those on whom it presses than by the noisy pretenders to exclusive humanity. In the meantime, it is a ladder for rivals climbing to power.

