

I

Before the Clash



THE THOMAS JEFFERSON WHO ARRIVED at Norfolk harbor in late November 1789 was not the same man who had left for France almost five years earlier. He had acquired a French suavity and polish, a different cut of hair, and an elegance of clothing. In place of the loose, shambling gait of a Virginia farmer, he walked with the more measured steps of a continental gentleman and held his head with little or no movement.

But he remembered his countrymen well. He knew that over 90 percent of them were farmers, and that this new version of himself would not do in America, not if he was to join the political world that President George Washington held out to him. He had not quite accepted, but he was already thinking of the style changes he would have to make. After all, his looks need not show in the letters he would write back to his French friends and near-conquests; there he could continue to show all the charm he thought they expected of him.

He wanted to hold on to those five years, for they had been like a second youth. He had gone abroad as a middle-aged widower, still grieving for his lost wife, and also as a semiretired politician who had to push himself to savor new experiences. But the magic of France had quickly enveloped him, making years that were his forties seem like an enchanted span from, say, twenty-five to thirty.

At the time, it had not mattered so very much that his flirtations had been platonic, though it took an effort to keep from seeing this

as a series of defeats. His justified confidence in his writing skills blinded him from realizing that his love letters were ponderous and even tiresome, possibly spoiling the opportunities that might have been. But nonetheless, there had been moments of titillation in the relationships, and his mind returned to these euphorically.

Now, as he disembarked in Norfolk, he was startled to learn that newspaper accounts had already told the public that he was to be secretary of state. Everyone he met on the dock bowed and called him "Mr. Secretary." President Washington was so anxious to have him accept the job that he had sent several letters: One had been handed to him before he left the ship. One dated October 13 caught up with Jefferson when he reached the inland town of Eppington, Virginia, on December 11. Four days later, as he continued toward his Monticello home, a copy dated November 30, 1789, reached him in the town of Chesterfield.

Jefferson quickly responded, but with an unusual delaying tactic. He wrote that he was "truly flattered and honored by your nomination of me to the very dignified office of Secretary of State." This was followed by a dozen lines that stressed "how poorly qualified" he was, and the strangely predictive words that he foresaw "the possibility that this may end disagreeably for me." But he added, "It is not for an individual to choose his post . . . and my inclination must be no obstacle." By thus leaving the decision in Washington's hands, Jefferson caused the president to write another letter in January that would reach him at home early in February 1790.

Meanwhile, another bit of pressure had been exerted when Jefferson's friend James Madison came to welcome him home, but also to press Washington's case and urge Jefferson to accept, which he finally did on February 14. Seldom has anyone been pressed so hard to accept a highly desirable political office. And yet, Jefferson's foreboding was meaningful. The appointment would prove painful, both for him and for Washington.

To begin with, the president's offer had come as a mixed joy and sorrow to Jefferson. To be secretary of state and clearly the senior among Washington's advisers was a high honor, holding the unspoken possibility that it could lead to the presidential office in four or eight or twelve years. What a triumphant slap at those who persisted in claiming that his role as Virginia's governor had ended shamefully

in fleeing from British raiders! If General Washington showed his approval, who could say a contrary word? Who else knew as much about the art of retreating?

But was this step back to politics the life he wanted? His inner voice probably cried "No!" many times, but just as often responded to a new and contrary ambition that said not "yes," but "perhaps."

Why this conflict? Jefferson had dreamed of returning to his beloved Monticello, improving the farms around it to strengthen his troublesome finances, altering the house according to the gracious neoclassical examples he had grown to love in Europe, living quietly with the books and friends that pleased him most. After five years of virtual freedom from supervision in France and the surrounding countries he had visited with such an avid appetite for learning and beauty, Washington's letter seemed more like a call to harsh duty than an invitation. It was a reminder that he would be expected to reside wherever the government might choose to set the still-undetermined capital, to attend meetings whenever someone else called them, and to think more about the advice he would owe to the president than about the much larger world he had seen whose main cities exceeded half a million in population.

But he must have been conflicted, for this newer thought taking his mind in the opposite direction had to be considered: *the presidency*.

He did not want it for personal aggrandizement, but for a chance to lead the nation toward the glowing future he had in mind and away from what he saw as a looming threat to the best hopes of mankind. It is curious that so little has been written about a Jefferson ambition to be president. Virtually every man in the upper ranks of American politics surely imagined a turn of fate that might propel him to the top. And this man, so often and so widely admired since his early twenties, could not have failed to encounter such an idea, if only because people at the many receptions that were thrown for him made remarks on the subject as they shook his hand. They all considered him special, as he had been used to hearing people say since his boyhood years. Why not presidential, then?

Nothing Jefferson wrote proves that such an ambition had struck him forcefully, but consigning the thought to paper was not to be expected. Yet his behavior in months to come pointed directly to a

presidential goal, and at least one keenly interested observer later revealed that he was sure of it. Once the thought had touched Jefferson, it must have become very intrusive. What were his chances and what would it take? Would being Washington's secretary of state advance his cause? That would depend on how well their opinions matched, and he could not know this in advance. He and Washington had exchanged innumerable letters over the years, but most of them dealt with vast generalities, such as the possibility of opening the Potomac River to greater traffic or a Jeffersonian observation on facts discovered in his travels. They had seldom discussed anything that could be called politics. If he accepted the new post, a fresh set of subjects would engage them. It was regrettable that a secretary of state could not sign on for a trial period, for once begun, the term should continue at the pleasure of the president.

The very idea that he was now expected to proceed in haste, when Washington had already been president for nearly a year without a secretary of state, made him question the importance of the role. It was galling to be told that there was suddenly some urgency about coming to self-important little New York to set up a Department of State in a temporary capital that consisted of only thirty-three thousand souls. But there was no decent way to turn down the appointment—not without inventing a tale about having contracted some dreadful ailment. He would not stoop to that. But he would not be rushed. Even if he was compelled to agree that Washington's offer must be accepted, there could be no haste about settling down to work. This must have been the mood that led to the letter he sent, considerably less reverential than Washington was used to getting:

Feb. 14, 1790

Sir,

I have duly received the letter of 21st January with which you have honored me, and no longer hesitate to undertake the office to which you are pleased to call me. Your desire that I should come as quickly as possible is a sufficient reason for me to postpone every matter of business, however pressing, which admits postponement. Still it will be the close of the ensuing week before I can get away, and then I shall have to go by way of Richmond, which will

lengthen my road. . . . I hope I shall have the honor of satisfying you that the circumstances which prevent my immediate departure are not under my control."

What it meant was that he would take his own good time to get to New York City and enter on his post. He would stay at Monticello for a reasonable week or so to rest from his ocean crossing, then attend the marriage of his younger daughter, Martha, to her cousin Thomas Mann Randolph. (This was one of "the circumstances" that prevented his "immediate departure.") Martha, barely seventeen, was not a beauty, but had a sweet look that accurately depicted her temperament. Jefferson was aware of how patiently she bore the endless strictures he steadily wrote her to admonish more attention to household skills that would please her husband "on which your whole happiness will depend." Yes, he was trying to do the work of her absent mother, but how could such a great writer have composed such dreary words? No feminist he, but nothing in the world would have kept him away from her wedding.

After that event, he needed a few days in Richmond, the state capital, to work out new payment arrangements with his English creditors. His debt to them—some of it going back to the estate his wife had inherited from her father—had risen to £7,500, about half of which was from compounded interest charges. How he hated bankers and their hideous compounding! And now he would be borrowing even more to pay for a lavish gift of land and slaves to the new couple. After that depressing chore, he would proceed in the general direction of New York on a route that might take him to stops at the homes of various old friends, depending on weather and road conditions.

A decade later, Jefferson's trip could have been much swifter if he had wanted to go by stagecoach. A curious bit of litigation had interrupted a trend to speed travel between the states. This had started in 1785 when the first American turnpike began to take shape in Virginia (going between Alexandria and the lower Shenandoah). But a grand jury in Baltimore had shockingly ruled that country roads were "a public grievance," and the travel industry was traumatized for over a decade. Only in 1804, with a push from Alexander Hamilton near the end of his life, was there a surge of corporate ventures that

began to create numerous turnpikes. The time it took to go between cities would plunge.

A stop Jefferson insisted on making was in Philadelphia, for he had heard that Benjamin Franklin was probably on his deathbed. A very touching last meeting took place between the fabled American representative to France and the man who had succeeded him. Enfeebled as he was, Franklin talked about the politics of Europe "with a rapidity and animation almost too much for his strength," Jefferson recalled. And Franklin also put into Jefferson's hands pages from the manuscript he was preparing of his own autobiography. His flair for the dramatic had not deserted the dying man, for part of these pages told of an attempt by Franklin in 1775 to avert the rebellion by the colonies through his friend Lord Howe, who would command British forces in America for a time. And Franklin had learned that it failed because—incredibly—Lord North, Britain's prime minister, actually wished to see a rebellion. This hidden fact was apparently suppressed in the final printing because of the explosive nature it would have had in Britain.

Sitting there and thinking of the unique life this person had lived, Jefferson found himself wondering whether a man so near death could still be thinking of the Revolution as Franklin had once called it—"a glorious task assigned to us by Providence."

After that, Jefferson's call on Benjamin Rush, a respected former legislator and a signer of the Declaration of Independence, made him feel that he knew the answer. For it was a joy to find themselves both as fixed on republican principles as they had been in their youth, and Jefferson emphasized again that "it is impossible not to be sensible that we are acting for all mankind." Ambitious as Jefferson still could be, he now treasured the freedom of private life. The right to be sitting with an old friend or the right to make his own plans as he had done in France now seemed vastly more attractive to him than the post he was about to undertake. Unless, of course, that post opened another door.

If he arrived in New York by mid-March, he thought, there should be time enough to pick up the threads of the young government that had been forming around George Washington. After a

year in office, the general was still trying to learn what the presidency meant and how he was to use this recently invented job.

Even though he had sat through every minute of the Constitutional Convention, wielding the gavel as its presiding officer, Washington had not grasped all the subtle nuances of power that were created there. He was so aware of his deficiency in subjects of this kind that on one occasion he wrote James Madison a remarkable note, thanking him “for letting me peep behind the curtain” at the mysteries of Madison’s attempt to create a new government.

So it goes without saying that Washington was a long way from fully understanding a far-reaching suggestion made by Connecticut’s brilliant Roger Sherman at that Convention. It could have changed the nature of American government profoundly if enough of the delegates had been keeping up with the trends in British government, as Sherman had. When the delegates were discussing how America’s chief executive was to be chosen and what his powers should be, Sherman suggested that the presidency was really “nothing more than an institution for carrying the will of the legislature into effect,” and that he should therefore be appointed by the Congress, not selected by the people and made into a separate center of power, which could only make it a cause of constant jockeying for position.

Sherman had been reading about developments in Britain, and he knew that this line of reasoning had been gathering force there for half a century. It resulted in the long-standing fact that whoever heads the majority party is always prime minister, which is to say chief executive. And it was a way of quickly translating the will of the voters into a single unified power source, not necessarily related to monarchism. Since many of the delegates had a great respect for the British way of governing, it might have made a great difference in the decision about America’s method of presidential choice if they had known this and realized that it was easily adaptable to republican government in America. But clearly no one was up to date on the subject, as Sherman was. And there was no sign that Washington had ever thought about such a precedent. As far as he knew, the presidency that he had stepped into was an unexplored mystery for him to adapt and shape.

Jefferson could not know that Vice President John Adams was being no help to Washington in shaping the presidency. This honest and dedicated vice president was given to exaggeration, and his advice in this case was a total failure. Adams had suggested that the president's every move be calculated to emphasize the grandeur of his position, "that a splendor and majesty be proportioned to the President's legal authority," and that he be addressed with almost monarchical titles (such as "His Highness, the President of the United States of America and Protector of Their Liberties"), all of which sickened the plainspoken general. And Adams's sudden new interest in elaborate hairstyle and bursts of emotion in his own new job led members of his party to say that he had "a half frantic mind." This was far from the truth. He had a superb mind, but it was so persistent that he could seem tiresome to those who disagreed with him.

Throughout his two terms, this first of America's vice presidents would be treated in a totally dismissive way; this was a pattern that would remain in place far into the future. Yet Adams would have a role to play, increasing with time. And the ambitious men who were disregarding him now would later wish they could replay the past.

Jefferson might have felt more of a sense of haste if he had realized that Washington was counting on him to join two much younger men as his chief advisers: James Madison, Jefferson's closest friend, now a leading member of the new Congress that he himself had created but often doing double duty because Washington prized him as a problem solver. The other was Alexander Hamilton, whom Jefferson had never met, though he knew of his dazzling reputation.

This young man, Jefferson had heard, had come from a Caribbean island and entered King's College in New York City at just about the time of the Boston Tea Party. He had become inflamed with the sheer, daring patriotism of the event and promptly wrote a political piece about it for the *New-York Journal*, praising the spirit of it and defending the natural right of the colonists. He had also given talks that held crowds of New Yorkers spellbound, especially because he looked younger than his nineteen years.

Jefferson, thinking mainly of the foreign affairs role he was to play, had in mind just one or two men whom he might recruit to assist him with running his new State Department. He had no inkling that

Hamilton, working eighteen hours a day, had already hired over thirty people to carry out his projects in the new Treasury Department, and planned to hire many more. Nor that even Jefferson's good friend Madison, as floor leader of the new House of Representatives, had become a martinet who urged fellow legislators to shorten their breakfasts and read fewer morning newspapers in order to push ahead with necessary legislation. Madison's performance during the opening session of the First Federal Congress was thought to have exceeded even his triumphs in the Constitutional Convention. He had molded the policies, forms, and procedures of the new government at a stage when nearly every action set a precedent.

Jefferson did not wonder at this, for he genuinely admired Madison and was often surprised to find himself adjusting his own thoughts because of a few quiet words Madison had said or written to him from an ocean away. Typically, while John Adams had doggedly insisted that pompous titles would strengthen the presidency and proposed that Washington at the very least be called "His Majesty, the President," Madison said in a speech to the House, "The more simple, the more republican we are in our manners, the more national dignity we shall acquire." His ability to reduce everything to an elegant simplicity was incomparable.

As for the other member of this trio of presidential advisers, Jefferson's early meetings with Hamilton would give no hint of the intense enemy the young man was to become. He knew, by reputation, that Hamilton had been a daring soldier before becoming General Washington's closest aide. It was known that he had once overridden the retreating general Charles Lee, rallied the fleeing men, and swept the British with a withering fire. There had been several such incidents, and his ambition for military glory would always struggle against his steadier skills of the mind.

Jefferson's words after his first introduction to Hamilton were very favorable, even laudatory. But it took only a few exposures for the suspicion to dawn that this younger man's head full of ideas and complex plans might become troublesome or deadly if one sought to alter them.

It was one of the worst moments in the new country's history for a clash of wills to strike the presidential office. The states were just

trying to learn new forms of cooperation rather than competition with one another. The Constitution was supposed to remake the old relationships that had seen them as adversaries in every form of domestic and foreign endeavor. It was a time when a fragile nation called for the stability that Washington could well have provided if his aides had been more dedicated to him and less to their own interests.

Washington had frequently shown and openly expressed great confidence in each member of the trio: Jefferson, Madison, and Hamilton. The word *cabinet* had not yet been introduced, but these three plus Henry Knox, as secretary of war, and Edmund Randolph, as attorney general, would almost have fit the term. Only Madison, as a member of Congress, would have been an oddity, for unofficially he was a key figure in both the legislative and executive branches of government. The president's dependence on these men gave them something exceeding what would later be called cabinet status. But Washington seldom met with them as a group, preferring the clarity of a one-on-one talk with the man whose subject was being discussed.

The situation, however, was destined to be clouded by the fact that the president's clear favorite was the youngest of the group. The general hid that as well as he could, but the truth broke through his resolve. And this, Jefferson had to notice, could well become a factor in his own political ambition.

Washington had respect for Jefferson's learning, enormous reach of interests, and ability to express and deliver his views. He very correctly considered Madison a true genius at reducing the knottiest questions to their simplest level and quickly pointing to the most practical solutions. But in his own heart he clearly trusted young Hamilton most of all. He intensely disliked being forced to express this fact, but the seething complaints about Hamilton's aggressiveness that would inevitably arise sometimes forced Washington to remind an angry elder person of Hamilton's record of accomplishments.

For a man with no son of his own, a certain amount of affection may have been involved, but it was more than that. On almost every issue, Hamilton's position—and his ability to explain it clearly—struck Washington as exactly how he felt on the subject. Hamilton's

almost unbelievable combination of battlefield daring and intellectual brilliance must have seemed magical to a general who had to work and ponder very hard to reach his impeccable conclusions. One wonders whether the president secretly saw the treasury secretary not as a younger man, but instead as his senior in the ability to propose a course of action on any given subject. It had been so during the war, when Captain Hamilton's suggested responses to incoming mail suited the general perfectly, and when Colonel Hamilton's remarks on strategy often seemed wiser to Washington than the opinions of his senior generals. It was noticed often enough by the older officers to cause tight-lipped resentment. And it continued to be so in the political world that Washington was trying to fit himself into. Hamilton was such a great help to him, yet such a cause of widespread jealousy.

There had been no sign of Hamilton's national role on the day of Washington's inauguration, April 30, 1789. Hardly daring to hope for a high office, he was, for once, subdued and cautious, hiding the massive ideas he wanted to introduce. With his private law practice producing a handsome income and his rising stature in New York State politics, he was unsure whether he wanted to leave that life at age thirty-two for a period in the penury and uncertainty of public office. But he knew that if the chance were offered to him, he would certainly grasp it.

At that time, the country was not paying interest on its debts and its bonds would have been called "junk" in today's terms. Hamilton dreamed of overturning this situation in a series of bold strokes. But it was three weeks before the lower house of Congress proposed that a Department of Finance be established. The Congress seemed blind to the urgency of creating a powerful Treasury. And for a time, because the danger of tax abuses was an overriding fear, there was the deadly threat that the leadership of this controversial department would be given to a board, in order to avoid handing any one individual great financial power. But strangely predictive was the fact that James Madison was the person who finally rose and, in his peculiarly persuasive way, explained to the Congress why one secretary should run the department. Thus he virtually gave the man who would become his determined opponent the very

position—secretary of the treasury—that he had dreamed of years ago, even while the Revolutionary War was raging.

Hamilton was warned by many of his friends that this job was dangerous—sure to bring accusations of financial wrongdoing against anyone who accepted it. And he had to face the great personal sacrifice of giving up his lucrative law practice and trying to live on a \$3,500 annual salary. But not for a moment did he consider passing up this opportunity to reach for the historic impact that he had in mind. He wanted to stamp the United States as the best managed nation in the world's history, a country that paid its war debts while others only blurred them by starting new wars. He was determined to make a dollar bill “as good as gold” anywhere in the world. He meant to add this form of greatness to the democratic opportunities that were already making *America* a magical word around the globe.