

2 parts in 1 Not in 1800
(c)

JOEL BARLOW
TO HIS
FELLOW CITIZENS,
OF THE UNITED STATES
OF AMERICA.

LETTER I.

*On the system of policy hitherto pursued by
their Government.*

Paris 4 March, 1799.

FELLOW CITIZENS,

SINCE your commercial intercourse with this country has been suspended, and the produce of your labour arrives at market by a double voyage, as it used to do when we were British Colonies, I rarely see an American News-Paper. It was only yesterday, that a writing, said to be a Letter from me to a member of Congress, dated in march 1798, came into my hands. I have it in a Boston Paper, called the *Centinel*; and, by some observations of the editor, I perceive that the authorship, a circumstance very trifling in itself, has, occa-

A

[C. 1800; W. m. D. 1800; Jan 4, 1801]

sioned doubts and disputes. The general tradition, that it is mine, has been questioned by some persons who express a tenderness for my reputation; for which I will certainly thank them, whenever they will convince me of the morality of their motives. Both opinions in this case are partly right, and both partly wrong. *Truth lies between*, as it often does in questions of more consequence than the present.

I did write a Letter to a member of Congress in march 1798, to which the publication in question bears a strong resemblance. Indeed the political cast and general complexion of my Letter are easily recognised in this; but every part of it is mutilated and distorted more or less. There is not a paragraph without some omissions, additions or changes, which in some places give a bitterness to party invective which I did not mean; in others, destroy all meaning, and render me unintelligible; and in others, vulgarise the style, vitiate the grammar, and make the phrases ridiculous.

I know not by what means, nor for what purpose this Letter has been intercepted, metamorphosed and published. I pretend not to say there was any intention of doing an injury to me or to my friends. The hasty manner in which a copy may be supposed to have been taken, if done by stealth, and the number of presses and hands of ignorant editors which it has probably passed through, might perhaps be sufficient to account for the variations, were it not that they are uniformly against me, -- that is, against that calmness of temper, dignity of manner, purity of language, and delicacy of political or personal animadversion, which I wish to preserve. The Letter was written in great haste, addressed to a very particular friend, and confided to a channel

of conveyance which I thought uncommonly safe. It may be supposed therefore to have been penned with a carelessness and freedom which would admit of corrections or alterations in favour of method and moderation. And there is reason to suppose that some at least of the alterations it has undergone would have been on that side, had they been the effect of chance, or even of ignorance.

But the substantial character of the Letter, so far as it respects my opinions on the system of policy pursued by our Executive towards France and England, during the period to which it relates, must answer for itself. Though I always reserve to myself the right of changing my opinions, as every man who is not omniscient must often have occasion to do; yet on this subject I have not changed them during the last year. It is my belief that it would cost you dearer even now to settle your dispute with France, than it would have done (had your negotiations been properly managed) at the time I wrote that Letter. How much you have unfortunately suffered from the piracies carried on under the French laws since that period, you can doubtless determine better than I; and what will be the final expense of the negotiation, those only will be able to decide who shall live to see it.

Thus much for the sentiments originally contained in that Letter. I will now rectify one or two mistakes, which I have observed in the American papers, relative to the circumstances under which it was written.

First: it is supposed by some, who do not reflect on the chronology of dates, that I was apprized of the attempts which had been made here to extort from our commissioners a bribe to individuals, and a promise of a loan to the govern-

ment. They imagine that I wrote under this impression; and consequently approved the measure. I believe that not the most distant hint of either of these base attempts was known, or whispered (beyond the circle of those persons mentioned in the dispatches) until their publication in Philadelphia; which happened to be on the same day that my letter was dated in Paris. The printed dispatches arrived here in May; and no man in America could feel a greater indignation than I did, at the piece of villainy therein detailed; though I am far from thinking that a proper use was made of the circumstance, either before or after it was communicated to the American government. I had no knowledge that even a loan was asked for on the part of France. It was my opinion that it was the policy of the American government, under circumstances then existing, to *offer* a loan; and a small one would have been sufficient. One fourth part of the sum you have since lost by plunder would have been acceptable, and might have been loaned consistently with that honor and national independence which I wish to see you maintain. The dispatches of general Pinckney, alluded to in my letter, were not those of the three commissioners, as supposed by the *Centinel*, but were dated the year before, and were the fruits of his former embassy.

Secondly: had that Letter been designed for publication, I should not have left it open to criticism in another point more remarkable than the one above noticed. In reviewing the errors of the American government, I there made no mention of those of the French; and it has been therefore concluded, from this omission, that I approved the conduct of the latter; that I saw nothing

wrong in that monstrous system of piracy and plunder exercised towards neutrals; -- indeed, I am supposed to have relished all the horrors that have attended this tremendous revolution. God forbid that I should lose my senses to such a degree! I have not only disapproved the innumerable acts of injustice and violence committed under the order of the 2^d of march 1797, and the law of the 18th of january 1798; but I have uniformly remonstrated, with as much force as an individual of little influence could do, against that order and that law, and against the general current of resentment which has marked the measures of this government towards that of the United States, ever since the ratification of the British treaty. This resentment has appeared to me far greater than the occasion would justify; and I have not failed to enforce this opinion wherever I thought it could be usefully done. But *Paris* is the place where it is proper to point out for correction the errors of the French government; and *Philadelphia*, those of the American. My friend was in Philadelphia. My Letter was written with the simple hope of doing some immediate good; not with a design of transmitting history to future ages. Where then would have been the use of swelling it with a list of blunders which might have been discovered on this side of the question? blunders, or *crimes* if you please, which no man of candour will deny; but on which his silence ought not to be construed into approbation. You might as well say that I believe in the doctrines of Mahomed, because I do not go out of my way to refute them.

We are so constituted and circumscribed in our powers of action, that most of the good or ill which we do in the world is the result of circumstances not always in our power to control.

Whoever will give himself the trouble of obtaining a competent knowledge of the French revolution, so as to be able to judge with intelligence, and weigh the infinite complication of difficulties and incentives to ungovernable passions that have lain in the way of its leaders, must indeed be shocked at their follies and their faults; but he will find more occasion to ask why they have committed so few, than why they have committed so many. A state of political insanity is not at all inconsistent with the situation in which they have been placed by the irresistible force of circumstances. And there are cases in which we ought to applaud men for the mischiefs they have not done, as well as to search excuses for those they have brought about.

I am sensible that, in your view, the wrongs committed by the French towards the United States are less excusable than those towards other nations. You form this opinion, not so much from national prejudice, as from a consciousness of the purity of your own intentions in your conduct towards this republic; from having felt a general friendship to her cause, and not perceiving a sufficient ground of complaint on which her resentment can be founded. But you are not to learn that jealousy is one of the strongest and blindest of the human passions; and I believe you will be convinced that the facts hinted at in my Letter, viewed through the mist of jealousy that had constantly surrounded the leaders in the revolution, could not fail of producing effects similar to what we now deplore.

No! my fellow citizens: I have too high a sense of justice and the rights of nations, to sanction maritime plunder from any quarter, or even to approve the least restriction on trade. A perfect liberty of commerce is among the most indubita-

ble rights of man ; and it is the best policy of nations. The establishment of this principle alone , with proper measures to preserve it , would have a powerful tendency , if not an infallible effect , to maintain a perpetual peace between countries separated by the ocean. The opposers of this branch of liberty , who do it from reflection , are not only the enemies of America , but they are the abettors of injustice , and the foes of humanity. They strive to perpetuate a system of war , of public devastation , private rapine , fraud , and cruelty , which disturb the tranquillity of states , discourage honest industry , and blacken the character of man. Those who oppose it through ignorance , and at the same time aspire to the task of administering the government of a free people , ought to be sent back to school , and there taught the rudiments of the science which solicits their ambition

Possessing these opinions , and seeing America move nearer to this principle than any other nation , how is it possible that I could approve the blind policy of European plunder , or look with indifference on the tyranny of the seas ? From the time when your first vessel was taken by the English , at the beginning of the present war , I expected to see some of your great men in power come forward with something luminous on the rights of nations relative to trade. From the reputed wisdom of America I expected to see Europe at last enlightened on a subject of so much importance to the human race. In addition to the freedom of your constitution , I considered you as possessing two singular advantages for the attainment of this great object. 1st. Nature had placed a wide ocean between you and those nations to which your commercial intercourse extended. And you had not , or ought not to have

any other political intercourse abroad, but what relates to commerce. 2^d From the nature of your trade and the constant result of your accounts current, you are always indebted to those nations in sums amounting from 15 to 30 millions of dollars. This state of your accounts was not confined to England, It extended (before the present war) to those other countries whose manufactures you were in the habit of importing; and to France and Holland in as high a proportion; compared with their manufactures imported, as to England.

The first of these advantages, being a sufficient bulwark against attacks by land, secured you from the political squabbles of Europe; leaving you vulnerable only in your commerce, The second furnished you, in your commerce itself, with a most powerful weapon of defence. The English began to plunder you in the year 1793, in a manner totally unprovoked, and without even a pretext. Here was an occasion which called for the talents of your leaders, and invited them to use with dexterity this weapon, which was the most legitimate, the most pacific, and the most effectual that was ever put into the hands of any government. But instead of this, an embassy is dispatched to London, to resign this precious weapon, the only infallible one you had, into the hands of the British king; and this for no other reason than for fear that a future Congress and another Executive might use it. Your situation, though new to you, was not difficult nor delicate; it required a declaration of neutrality, a solemn declaration and definition of the rights of neutrality, and a notification of your intention that all property taken unjustly from your citizens by any Power at war should be compensated by so much property of the subjects of that Power found within your jurisdiction, whether in the

public funds or in the hands of private debtors. There is nothing unjust or immoral in this mode of proceeding. The aggression would be on the part of the foreign Power; you compensate your own citizen; and leave that Power to compensate hers; and if she does not do it, the injustice is on her side, both as first aggressor and final delinquent. If she makes the compensation she will not be likely to repeat the offence, because it would be an expensive business; if she refuses compensation, she will soon be brought to reason by the clamours of her suffering subjects. England, in such cases, would not fail to do you justice; and that on the only principle you can count upon with certainty from any foreign nation, an attention to her own interest.

Let it not be said that such a sytem of policy would prevent our merchants from obtaining sufficient credits abroad for all the useful purposes of commerce. Or if any person is really of that opinion, I desire him to visit Manchester and Birmingham, and see whether he can pass through those towns without being struck with the wonderful facility of obtaining credit; and without being besieged for orders by rival houses on almost any terms. Let him then travel in Germany, or in any part of Europe, and observe the quantity of riders for English manufacturing houses, who are hawking their samples of goods, and offers of credit, in every corner of the continent.

I am sensible that I might strengthen this part of my argument, in the minds of some readers, by adopting a prevailing opinion, that the facility of obtaining private credits abroad is of no service to our country. But I do not partake in this opinion. I believe that such credits are of service; and that the English trade in particular is highly

beneficial to the United States, in an agricultural and economical point of view; but more especially as furnishing a ready instrument in the hands of American debtors, to be held up by our government in terror to one of the most quarrelsome States of Europe.

But it is said to be *dishonorable* to resort to the sequestration of private property as a compensation for public wrongs. Alas, when are we, poor children of feudality, to obtain proper ideas of honor, or of any other of the moral sentiments! What can be more honorable in a government than to prevent the occasion of wars, protect the works of peace, encourage honest industry, and induce foreign Powers to hold a steady check on the licentiousness of private violence, sea robbery, murders and other cruelties, which attend the consciousness of maritime superiority in some of the nations of Europe? Such being the object, and this object being at least an honorable one, let us examine the means here proposed; and compare them with those which are commonly resorted to; for which we find plenty of precedents, and therefore have not been told that they are dishonorable. After spoliations have been committed on the property of individuals, and you have made sufficient and ineffectual remonstrances to the government of the offending party, I suppose none will deny that it would be honorable to fit out armed vessels and make reprisals on the property of the nation that has committed the violence. But what is this but sequestering private property? The only difference in the two cases is, that the latter is attended with great expence to yourselves, leads to battles, homicides, cruelties, and a surplusage of plunder, which generally bring on a war; whereas the former is a calm, unexpensive proceeding, which gives you

your compensation by weight and measure, excites no ill blood, and can never, of itself, become a pretext for a continuance of hostile measures on either side. Take another comparison: it is not uncommon to lay embargoes, and to sequester embargoed property, to compensate for injuries sustained. This indeed is attended with less expence, and less bullying and battling, than reprisals made at sea; and therefore it may be thought not quite so honorable; but it is allowed. And what is the difference between this mode and the one of sequestering debts? In both cases the property is *bona fide* brought to your country and entrusted to your care, with a full understanding that you will perform the part of faithful agents, pay for what you buy, and restore the rest to its owners. Why, I will tell you what is the difference: in the case of embargo, the ships at least are subjected to great and useless damage; the crews are left in idleness and vice; the vessels rot; and the cargoes are exposed either to perish, or to be sold at a forced sale; and it will often happen that at least three quarters of the value of the property detained is clearly lost to all parties: while in the seizure of debts, there is no loss, and no extraordinary expence.

But there is another objection which I must undertake to answer. It is said that to sequester the property of a foreigner in the public funds would injure the *credit* of the United States. I comprehend the argument perfectly well: it means their *borrowing credit*. As to their credit for moral honesty, political economy, national dignity, good sense, and that steady pursuit of pacific principles which inspires respect and confidence abroad, and the love and veneration of their own citizens, --- this sort of credit would be greatly benefited by such a system, if it were solemnly

declared as a principle of neutrality, and impartially executed whenever occasion should require. But a *credit* in the mercantile sense of the word, or a facility of making loans, deserves a farther consideration. It is, in my opinion, an instrument too dangerous to be trusted in the hands, I will not say of any executive government, but even a legislative body. I have examined pretty fully in a former publication (*) the advantages and disadvantages of such a credit in the policy of a free republic generally; without applying it to my own country in particular. The disadvantages are terrible beyond description; and I will only add here, that I wish to see no such credit habitually in the government of the United States. I acknowledge that there are cases in which it might be highly beneficial; and so there are cases where an unlimited arbitrary power might be advantageously concentrated for a moment in one man. But no prospect of such a case, though possible, has been or ought to be thought sufficient to induce you to provide for it in your constitution. If you had been convinced, therefore, that the power you have delegated to congress of borrowing money on the credit of the United States was as dangerous as it would be to delegate the power of creating a dictator, you doubtless would not have inserted such a clause in your constitution, without some modification or restriction, which would not have been difficult to apply to so tremendous an instrument of innovation and abuse. Though great mischiefs have already been done by the exercise of this power, thus indiscreetly trusted out of your hands, yet it is not impossible to arrest the evil where it is;

(*) *Advice to the Privileged Orders*, chap. 5. where the funding system is discussed.

and in my opinion you ought to attempt it without farther delay. Otherwise it will inevitably go on increasing to a degree which no man will pretend to calculate, and no friend to his country can think of but with horror. Annex to your constitution an amendment to this effect: *That in future no assumption or obligation for the payment of money shall be made or authorised, by the Congress, the Executive, or any other officer of the United States, so as to be binding on the people thereof, except in case of actual invasion; and then for the sole purpose of immediate defence against such invasion.*

Experience has certainly taught us by this time, what theory unhappily did not, that a few detached citizens, however virtuous in other respects, cannot be safely trusted with the fates of nations, and the happiness of future ages, in a business attended with so many temptations, as that of thrusting the hand into the long and open purse of posterity. The giddiness of power, the violence of passion, the multiform solicitations of artful speculators, will almost necessarily drive them headlong to sell our future earnings, and entail slavery on mankind; when it can be done by the simple act of voting; and when the responsibility is not to us who sent them, but to generations not yet in being.

Look back through ten years of your history, and examine, if you can with patience; the rise, progress, and present state of your national debt. See with what wanton prodigality it has been hunted up from every corner and in every shape, assumed, funded, and saddled upon you. You were told ten years ago, and with such effrontery as appeared to gain your belief, that if you would have the goodness to fund the proposed debt, with all its accumulations, it would be very easi-

ly lessened and very soon extinguished ; that the rate of interest in America would soon fall from *six* to *five* , and then to *four* per cent , and you were flattered with the idea that you would speedily be able to make new loans at these latter rates , to purchase in the old capital ; and by that means so diminish the annual call for money , as to be able by a surplusage of revenue to sink the whole debt in a short time . You have now had ten years of peace since this arrangement ; eight of which were years of such uncalculated prosperity as was never before experienced by any nation , and was astonishing even to yourselves . During this time , how have the prospects , held out in your funding scheme , been realised ? Your debt has been constantly increasing ; and your government is now borrowing money , or trying to borrow it , at *eight* per cent ; and for no other object , as I can discern , but to augment the blessings of a national debt . As to the rate of interest offered , it is a matter of very little importance in my view of the subject . I wish the money were not to be found at *twenty* per cent ; or rather , I wish the government of the United States , were unable to borrow a dollar at any interest whatever , and were always to continue so , except in case of war and invasion .

Your funding system , considered as to the circumstances and prospects under which it was adopted , is doubtless one of the most memorable pieces of imbecility and impudence that ever was imposed upon a nation . The scheme when presented to Congress , and the report on public credit that accompanied it , have indeed procured extraordinary honours to their authors in America ; but they would have done no remarkable credit to any clerk employed at *seventy five* pounds a year in the fiscal department in London . They con-

tain no ideas that are new , or luminous , or analogous to your situation. All is a dead routine of expedient , familiar to every corrupt government in Europe , whose only object is to find present money by any means whatever. And all the merit there is in the scheme , is the novelty of applying an old and desperate remedy where there was no disease ; or rather of creating a disease , in order to apply it to the remedy. The debt thus accumulated , and still accumulating by the constant solicitude of those who raised it up , has indeed finally assumed the appearance of an incurable disease ; or at least its state has become so alarming as to require your most serious consideration and immediate exertion , to arrest it , if possible , where it is , and try to get it under.

The actual state of things with you , if not desperate , is at least disquieting to the friends of liberty. When I see the American Executive advertising to borrow money at *eight* per cent , what do I see but a youthful , free , and flourishing nation advertising itself for sale ! I see an infant Hercules , after having strangled the serpents in his cradle , and risen on his feet with an indication of future force destined to free the world from violence , tie himself for life to the apron-strings of the same Juno who had brought the serpents to devour him. Your leaders attach you to England , not only by commercial treaties , which ought to humble you in your own eyes , as much as they disgrace you in the eyes of the world , but by seeking precedents in every thing among the worst of her follies ; things indeed that scarcely pass for follies in her , since the weakness , or wickedness , consists chiefly in applying them to a country where they do not belong , and for which they never could have been invented. Your physicians have gone to a decrepid , intemperate

old man , and borrowed his strong cordials , his bandages and gouty velvet shoes , to administer them with cruel empiricism to a sturdy plow-boy.

France is at this time unable to obtain a credit , or to borrow money on any terms , even from her own citizens. As a friend to France I rejoice at it. She now spends about *thirty* millions sterling a year ; if she could borrow with the same fatal facility as England , she would spend at least *sixty* millions. What will be her financial situation or policy at the end of the war, I cannot tell. Her debt will doubtless be enormous , and in a very depreciated state. I hope she will have more justice than to follow our example in funding it , in all its undistinguished forms and accumulated size. I would rather see it cut up into paper money , given out to the creditors , and then set afloat , collected and burnt , in the course of three years , by the operation of one specific and adequate tax. I do not pretend that this would be the most just or politic method that could be devised ; but I am certain it would be less *unjust* , and less *impolitic* , than to encrease it ten fold , by raising it at once from *ten* per cent to a *hundred* , and fixing it on the nation forever at the highest rate of interest known in the country. A middle course may doubtless be found , which would do less injustice than either of these extremes. I think too there was such a middle course , to be discovered in America ; and I think it would have been discovered , had there been no speculators in congress , or about the treasury. Whenever your eyes shall cease to be dazzled with men , and you will fix them on measures , you will doubtless adopt the same opinion.

But in answer to what I have suggested relative to the best mode of defence against the insults of Europe , it will be said that you have settled your

dispute with England, without resorting to it; and, what is more, you have stipulated that you never will resort to it. Have you ever calculated the real expense, past, present, and to come, of settling that dispute in the manner in which you have done it? It has cost you, 1st. a sacrifice of character, perhaps irretrievable, in the disgrace of having injured your old friend in her distress, aided your most inveterate enemy, and abandoned the strong hold which the nature of things had given you, and in which you always would have been able to defend yourselves against them both, with perfect dignity and independence. You seem to have forgotten that different nations, as well as different animals, have different means of defence, with which nature and circumstances have respectively endowed them. England is defended almost entirely by a maritime force, without deeming it necessary to fortify her towns, or keep on foot any considerable army by land. Austria depends wholly upon her land troops and her fortifications. The Pope, though for many ages the most powerful monarch in Europe, depended on no physical force by land or sea, but altogether on a moral force, or church policy. Now if either of the latter Powers had said to England: lay aside your navy: it is dishonorable to make use of wooden walls and floating batteries: you ought to allow your enemy to land in your country when he pleases, and then trust to your bayonet or your prayer-book for defence, --- is it probable that England would have been persuaded by that argument; to set fire to her ships? The defence of the United States lay in the peculiar nature of their commerce. You had an invincible bulwark in the debts you were constantly owing and renewing with all the nations that had it in their power to

menace your repose. But the first nation that takes it in her head to insult you , comes and tells you that your mode of defence is dishonorable , that you must not use it , but give it up by compact. And , although it was more sure , more peaceable , more natural and less expensive , than any other that could be imagined , you immediately resign it into her hands.

2^d. Your manner of settling that dispute has brought on a rupture with France , which has already cost , in private plunder and public preparation for war , at least 60 millions of dollars. And it is not yet certain how much higher these losses will rise , before the business is terminated.

3^d. The most frightful and most incalculable expense , is one which is only yet beginning to begin : it is that terrible scourge of maritime nations , a military navy. I beg you to contemplate for a moment the abyss that your leaders are digging under your feet in the naval system now organising with so much address. You will then listen at your leisure to that swarm of speculators , who live upon your losses , and are now clamoring in favour of this system with as much affectation of patriotism , as if your salvation , instead of theirs , depended upon it. I will only observe that it has been the ruin of every nation that has hitherto adopted it ; and that it must be so from its nature. It is the syphon put in suction , which never can stop , or moderate its action , till all that feeds it is exhausted. (*)

To assist in dragging you into this business , you have been told (I think in one of those oracles

(*) I purpose , on another occasion , to examine the naval system of Europe ; and to show that it has been and must be ruinous , even to those nations which had more plausible reasons for adopting it than we can have.

delivered to both houses of Congress) that there is no example among mankind of a commercial marine, without a military marine to support it. The fact is not so; and if it were, that is no reason why it should continue to be so. The republics of Ragusa, Hamburgh, Lubeck, and Bremen, are among the oldest governments of Europe; and they are in a high degree *navigating States*; that is, they have each of them a large commercial marine, and have had for many ages, without any military marine. Some of my readers will smile when they perceive that I am going to compare any of those little sovereigns with the great and independent republic of the United States. I shall do it only in one point; and there is one point in which the comparison is very striking, and I think applicable to the present subject. None of the neighbouring Powers thinks proper to attack the commerce of those sovereignties, because the interest of other neighbouring Powers is concerned in its independence. In like manner, the Power of St. James's (if our commerce were kept on its natural footing of self-defence) would not think proper to attack it, because the Power of Liverpool, Birmingham, Sheffield, Manchester, London, and other commercial towns; which contain our creditors and stockholders, would oppose it for the strongest of all reasons, and with indubitable effect. The power of the Hague would be restrained, for the same reason, by the Power of Amsterdam; the Power of Paris, by that of Bordeaux, Nantz, and St. Domingo; and so of the rest. I make no exception in the argument on account of the present deplorable rupture with France, because this rupture never would have happened, if we had not first resigned our armour to England; and because the necessary energies and violent convulsions

sions of the revolution have concentrated for a moment all possible powers within the walls of Paris; so that the voice of the commercial towns, the colonies, and the true interests of the nation, are not heard. But this is a crisis, so far as it respects France, which cannot be repeated; and so far as it respects the provocation on our part; I hope it never will.

Our essential character is that of an agricultural people; and, happily for us, the vast quantities of our vacant lands, which call for culture, and demand a population equal to half Europe, will preserve us in this condition for ages to come. Our consumption of European manufactures must therefore continue, and even encrease. The rate of interest, during this period, will necessarily be higher in America than in Europe. Of consequence, the mass of private debts, habitually due from our merchants to those of the manufacturing nations, will not diminish, but probably increase, at least for many years; perhaps as long as a military marine will be suffered to exist in any country. There could be no fear therefore that this our national defence would fail us, as long as the present system of European policy should continue; and we might at least *furnish* an example, if we could not *find* one, of maintaining a commercial, without a military marine. And I cannot but hope that there are persons now living who will see the day when not a cannon shall be allowed to be carried to sea, at least on the Atlantic and the European seas.

But the navy system with you is like the funding sytem. When once the funding scheme was adopted as a principle by your speculating legislators, it was necessary to create a debt to support it. For as the system could not live without the debt; and as they were determined to have the

former, they must of course raise up the latter. In like manner, the rage for a navy, which the same politicians have been kindling and puffing for some years, is at last wrought into a system. They have created a new ministerial department, adorned with all the pomp of patronage, and ready to contribute its part in the splendor of the Executive, and the growth of the public debt. They have now at least one argument, for building a fleet; for what is a marine minister, without a maine? And what is a navy, without ships? These two systems, whatever may have been the intention of their authors, are certainly calculated for the destruction of liberty in the United States. And they will not fail of their effect, unless they are checked in their present career.

No one will deny that a great change is taking place in the state of society in Europe, both as to the interior government of nations, and their exterior and reciprocal intercourse. The rapid progress of thought, set loose from the shackles of precedent, and following the career of revolution that now shakes the political world, must necessarily lead to a new order of things. We all agree likewise, at least all who reflect, that the Law of Nations is exceedingly vitious and unreasonable in many respects; especially in what concerns the rights of war and peace relative to commerce. It gives too much favor and encouragement to a state of war, and subjects to too many inconveniencies and vexations the inhabitants of such countries as choose to remain in peace. It is evident that these unnatural regulations were made for kings, and not for people. They are founded on the principle that a state of war is the chief solicitude of those who govern; and the great object to be encouraged and secured. This is the origin of those exceptions in the articles of free transportation,

which have risen to an enormous list, called *contraband of war*; it likewise gave rise to the practice of searching neutral vessels for enemy's goods; of subjecting them to extraordinary and unnecessary rules of proof, to establish the property; and many other ingenious vexations; as if we must make apologies for wishing to live in peace, and for being producers, instead of destroyers, of the aliments of human life.

No pacific nation can certainly be satisfied with this state of things; as it evidently prefers violence and rapine to the honest pursuits of industry. Some of the Powers of Europe, sensible of these wrongs, have united their efforts with those of the friends of liberty, in attempting, for many years past, to change the Law of Nations in this respect; to emancipate neutral commerce from the tyranny of contraband, and screen it from the seizures and vexations incident to the prevailing system. America once joined them in these views, and adopted the amelioration, as far as possible, in her early treaties in Europe; till her government chose to sacrifice them to a more favorite project, and threw them into the general hecatomb of rights and principles, buried in the British treaty.

If these revolutions in Europe should terminate in favor of general interior liberty, which is altogether probable, they must necessarily extend to exterior or commercial liberty. The Law of Nations must undergo a revision; and it must be settled on a general basis of peace and honesty, instead of violence and rapine. It would indeed have been glorious in the United States, who had given the first example to the world of interior and domestic liberty (in which they have now so many imitators) to have been also the first in asserting, defining, and maintaining the exterior liberty

of trade , and those rules of national intercourse which must finally be resorted to , as the basis of a pacific system. Your geographical situation as relative to Europe , not only called for such a measure , but would have ensured its success.

But while we regret that so singular an opportunity of doing so much good has been slighted and thrown away , it becomes us to consider how much of the error is still capable of being retrieved , and what will be the proper moment and the best method of attempting it. What are the measures that America ought to take , *to secure her own liberty ; establish a permanent and equal independence from every foreign Power ; command the respect and gain the confidence of all mankind ; and induce the commercial nations to adopt a general plan of pacific intercourse , which will perpetuate itself , and better the condition of society ?* It is possible that these enquiries may be the subject of another Letter which I may address to you , my fellow citizens , whose interest I will never cease to cherish. I am your brother by the close and complicated ties of blood , of early sympathies , common dangers , and common triumphs ; and your happiness is naturally and habitually nearer to my heart than that of any other nation ; though my general philanthropy leads me to pity the condition of every injured people , and to censure , if I cannot restrain , those who lead them into error.

Some of you who have blamed me for the severity of my remarks on the conduct of your Executive. It is because you have made them gods , that you are offended with me for finding them but men. I never doubted the patriotism of your principal leaders ; that is , so far as patriotism consists in good intentions. But I doubt the patriotism of those who lead your leaders. I see

immense fortunes made by your funding legislators, out of the public funds which they funded for themselves. I see the most perfidious measures proposed, adopted, and persisted in, for hurling you from the exalted station which enabled you to give commercial law to the governments of Europe; and for crouching you under the pelican wing of the worst of those governments. I see the treaty that consummates this business, ratified in a gust of passion, a moment of personal resentment at an intercepted letter written by an officious French Minister which happened to speak of the western insurrection. And when the indignation of France, though excited by repeated provocation, rises with symptoms of extravagant fury, and threatens an unjustifiable measure of revenge, I see no prudent or manly attempts on your part, to allay the storm and prevent a rupture; but prevarication about facts is given for explanation; and gasconade at home keeps time with humiliation abroad. Then comes the flood of piracy and plunder let loose upon your property; a scene of wickedness which no man can abominate more than myself, and no man has endeavoured more to prevent or mitigate. But when I trace these deplorable effects to their proper and indubitable causes, I cannot confine my animadversions to this side of the Atlantic. Though you may choose to deify your first magistrates, the original authors of these calamities, --- though you enshrine them in the temple of infallibility, fence them round with sedition laws, and intoxicate them with addresses, birth-day-odes, and bacchanalian toasts, --- I see in them some of the frailties of men; and I will not join the chorus of adoration.

With respect to men, I am of no party; I am a republican in theory and practice; notwithstanding

ing the disgrace into which that principle seems to be falling in America. I consider it as my unalienable right, as well as my indispensable duty, to render a service to you whenever I find occasion. And when such service has led me to notice what I thought wrong in the administration of your government, I have always done it; and in such a manner as I thought would be most likely to lead to a correction of the abuse. And I shall not relinquish this right, nor neglect this duty, whoever may be the men, and whatever the party, to whom you may choose to delegate your powers.

Among my endeavours to serve you, as a volunteer in the cause of humanity, there is none which I have had more at heart than that of preventing a war between you and France, and of bringing about a reconciliation, on terms honorable and advantageous to each. I have no doubt but that both governments desire it; but whether they do or not, as long as I deem it for the interest of both nations, and there remains any hope of success, I will not slacken my exertions. I do not believe in the modern doctrine of your cabinet, that it is a crime in a private citizen to serve his country; or even to call in question the infallibility of its administration. And I know no man in America who did believe it, as long as he remained a private citizen. I am confident, and you may be in time, that the labors of myself and a few other men, not commissioned for the purpose, have hitherto prevented a war. But how long this will continue to be the case, I cannot pretend to say.

I have been animated in these exertions, not only by the desire of diminishing present evils, and of sparing the blood and treasure of the present generation, but of preventing the cause of

liberty from falling into disgrace by the quarrels of the two republics, and of disappointing the tyrants of the world, who anticipate this sort of triumph to their own cause. Perhaps I deceive myself; but I cannot yet renounce the belief, that the principle of free representative government is so manifestly preferable to the principle of monarchy, that it will soon be adopted and brought into general practice among the nations of Europe. I believe that if France has not yet reduced to practise, the liberty she has vindicated in theory, both civil and commercial, it is owing to a prolongation of revolutionary measures, necessitated by the state of Europe, and not to a forgetfulness of principle. She has not yet taken measures to establish the liberty of the seas, because she has not yet arrived at that state of tranquility which will enable her to look beyond present exigencies, to plans of permanent improvement. The same apology will not apply to the United States. You have had one period, and a pretty long one, of unexampled prosperity and repose; during which, your government appears to have done little for America but increase her debt, and nothing for Europe but imitate her follies.

I was indeed in hopes that advantage would be taken of the elevated ground on which you stood, to lay the foundation of an edifice that should promise, at least one day, to afford a shelter to the human race. I expected to see you propose a basis for a law of nations, to be established in reason, justice and the principles of peace. And I flattered myself, that when France should come to her senses, and rest from her military labors, we might see the two greatest republics on earth, not only enjoying liberty themselves, but recommending it to others, by

removing the occasion of wars. But if you really have no talents among you of a higher nature than what are necessary to copy precedents from old monarchies, I pity you, and call upon you to pity me. It is time to despair of the perfectibility of human society, and make up our minds to return to slavery, monarchy and perpetual war.

JOEL BARLOW.

I write but few private letters on political subjects; but as the one which has given occasion to the foregoing has been made public in such an imperfect form, I am induced to subjoin hereto a copy of the following, which possibly might otherwise meet a similar destiny. Not that I apprehend that the Person to whom it was addressed would adulterate or even publish it; but accident may throw it into other hands.

TO GEORGE WASHINGTON.

Paris, 2d October, 1798.

SIR,

On hearing of your late nomination as commander in chief of the American armies, I rejoiced at it not because I believe the war which this nomination contemplates is yet unavoidable, and that it will furnish an occasion for a farther display of your military talents; but because it may enable you to exert your influence to a greater effect in preventing the war. By becom-

ing more the centre of information than you could be in your retirement, you will be better able to judge of the dispositions of both governments, and to offer such counsels to your own as may tend to remove the obstacles that still oppose themselves to a reconciliation.

Were you now President of the United States I should not address to you this letter, because, not knowing my inclination for the tranquillity of retirement, you might think that I was seeking a place, or had some other object in view than the simple one of promoting peace between the two republics. But I hope, under present circumstances, you will believe my motive to be pure and unmixed, and that the object of my letter is only to call your attention to the true state of facts.

Perhaps few men, who cannot pretend to have been in the secrets of either government, are in a better situation than myself to judge of the motives of both; to assign the true causes of their unhappy misunderstanding; or to appreciate their present dispositions, pretences and wishes. I am certain that no one labors more sincerely for the restoration of harmony, on terms honorable to the United States, and advantageous to the cause of liberty.

I will not in this place go over the history of past transactions. It would be of little use. The object is to seize the malady in its present state, and try to arrest its progress. The dispute at this moment may be characterized simply and literally a *misunderstanding*. I cannot persuade myself to give it a harsher name, as it applies to either government. It is clear that neither of them has any interest in going to war with the other; and I am convinced that neither of them has the inclination. That is, I believe the balance of

inclination as well as of interest, on both sides, is in favor of peace.

But each government, though sensible of this truth with respect to itself, is ignorant of it with respect to the other. Each believes the other determined on war; and ascribes all its conduct to a deep rooted hostility. The least they can do, therefore, under these impressions, is to prepare for an event that they both believe inevitable; while they both wish to avoid it.

By what fatality is it that a calamity so dreadful is to be *rendered* inevitable because it is *thought* so? Both governments have tongues, and both have ears. Why will they not speak? why will they not listen? The causes that have hitherto prevented them are not difficult to assign. I could easily explain them, as I believe, to the satisfaction of all parties; and without throwing so much blame on either government, as each of them at present ascribes to the other. But I will avoid speaking of any past provocations on either side. The point which I wish to establish in your mind is, that the French Directory is at present sincerely desirous of restoring harmony between this country and the United States, on terms advantageous to both parties. I wish to convince you of this, and through you the American government, because that government, being desirous of the same thing, would not fail to take such steps as would lead immediately to the object.

In offering you my proofs of the present disposition on this side, you will permit me to observe, that some of them are from their nature incapable of being detailed, and others improper to be trusted to the casualties of a letter. But I will mention a few that are ostensible, and, so far as they go, undeniable. 1st The Directory has de-

clared, that it will receive and treat with any minister from America who shall appear to be sent with a real intention of treating and terminating existing difficulties. I have no doubt but such was the intention when the last envoys were sent; but, from some unfortunate circumstances, the Directory did not believe it. 2^d As a preliminary, it has declared that in the negotiation there shall be no questions of loans of money, or apologies for offensive speeches pronounced by the Executive on either side. 3^d All commissions given to privateers in the West-Indies are recalled, and when new commissions are given, the owners and commanders are to be restricted under bonds to the legal objects of capture. 4th An embargo that had been laid on American vessels within the Republic, in consequence of a report that a war had been begun on the part of the United States, was taken off as soon as it was ascertained that such war had not been begun; and a new declaration was at that time sent to America of the wishes of France to treat (1)

These facts will doubtless come to your knowledge through other channels before you receive this letter. But there are other facts which in my mind are equally clear, though to you they will be destitute of corroborating circumstances, and must rest on my own information and opinion : 1st That this government contemplates a just indemnity for spoliations on the American com-

(1) Since writing this letter, I am at liberty to state that the new declaration, here referred to, was dispatched from Paris, through an official channel about the end of September last. It should seem that it had not arrived at Philadelphia before the opening of congress in December, as the President's speech alludes to a declaration made to Mr. Gerry in July, containing a sort of condition; but it takes no notice of this subsequent one, which was perfectly explicit and unconditional.

merce, to be ascertained by commissioners, in a manner similar to the one prescribed in our treaty with England. 2^d That the legislation will soon be changed here with respect to neutrals. and all flags put on the footing of the Law of Nations. 3^d That a public agent would have been named, and sent to Philadeldhia soon after Mr. Gerry's departure, were it not for the apprehension that he would not be received. There was a doubt whether the American government would not have already taken such measures of hostility, as to be unwilling to listen to terms of accommodation. And the Directory did not choose to risk the chance of seeing its offers refused. 4th That the Directory considers these declarations and transactions as a sufficient overture on its part; that it has retreated to an open ground which is quite unsuspecting; that a refusal on the part of the American government to meet on this ground, will be followed by immediate war; and that it will be a war of the terrible and vindictive kind.

This, Sir, is my view of the present state of facts. Should it make that impression on your mind which I desire for the sake of humanity that it may, you will judge whether it does not comport with the independence of the United States, and the dignity of their government to send another minister to form new treaties with the French Republic. In a war there is clearly nothing to be gained by us, not even honor. Honor indeed may be saved by war, and so it may be by negotiation, But the calamities inseparable from a war of this kind, and under present circumstances, would be incalculable. I do not say that the United States, or any portion of them, would be conquered; but they would sacrifice great numbers of their best citizens, burthen themselves with four times their present

(32)

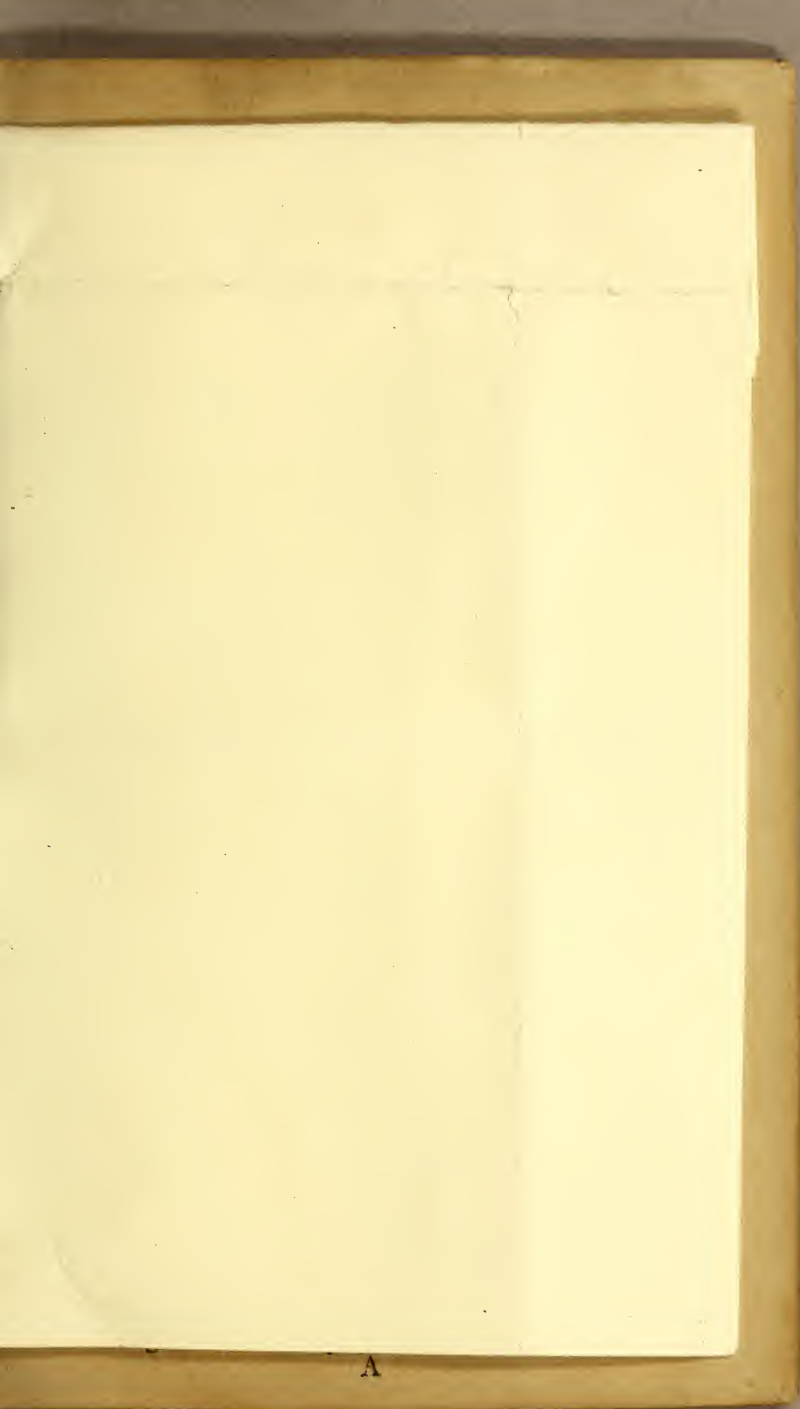
debt, overturn the purest system of morals, and lose the fairest opportunity that ever a nation had of rising to greatness and happiness on the basis of liberty.

Were I writing to a young general, whose name was yet to be created, I might deem it vain to ask him to stifle, in its birth, a war, on which he had founded his hopes of future honors. But you, Sir, have already earned and acquired all that can render a man great and happy, can surely have no object of ambition, but to render your country so. To engage your influence in favor of a new attempt at negotiation, before you draw your sword, I thought it only necessary to convince you that such attempt would be well received here, and probably attended with success. I can only assure you that such is my sincere opinion, and that my information is drawn from unsuspected sources.

I am not accustomed to interpose my advice in the administration of any country, and should not have done it now, did I not believe it my duty, as a citizen of my own, and a friend to all others. I see two great nations rushing on each others bayonets, without any cause of contention but a misunderstanding. I shudder at the prospect, and wish to throw myself between the vans and suspend the onset, till a word of explanation can pass.

I hope my letter will have cast some light on the subject. But whether it will or not, I know you will excuse the attempt; for you know my zeal is honest.

JOEL BARLOW.



B577
B577

B07-6396