



John Williams and Clay Jenkinson are hard at work on their first book together, *Letters to Thomas Jefferson*. This adaptation of their stage performances enables broader discussion on all of the topics of which we would like to hear President Jefferson's thoughts. Please enjoy this small sample of our work in progress and check back for updates on when *Letters* will hit bookstores in 2008.

**AN EXCERPT FROM
LETTERS TO
THOMAS JEFFERSON**

possibly respond to all the questions you raise or face the challenges you have put to me. I hope you will permit me to choose a couple of your topics as they seem agreeable or useful to me, and to postpone some of these subjects for a time when the field work, and my refashioning of Monticello are less pressing. There is a season for all things, the old book tells us, and I trust your patience is equal to your enthusiasm.

Surely you are aware that the polite epistle was the central form of communication in my world, and that I was famous for the quantity and I blush to report the quality of my letters. I am told that in your day there are more efficient and reliable forms of communication, some of them instantaneous over long distances, and that the personal letter, indited on paper, is as rare as the woolly mammoth. From what I can tell, and I certainly mean no disrespect in saying so, I am your only correspondent. Unfortunately, you are just one of scores of individuals with whom I am in regular communication.

You may have seen illustrations or read descriptions of my polygraph, my “many writer” (I know you know no Greek), which enabled me to make a copy of my letters at the moment I composed them. People in your day routinely regard me as an inventor, but this is not true in any meaningful sense. Whilst in Europe I formulated, I will not say invented, the “mold board of least resistance,” the most efficient plow in the history of civilization. It amazed me that the plows of my time were grossly inefficient, given the plow’s primary importance in the history of mankind. Using calculus, which was then called “fluxions,” I was able to determine the plowshare design of least friction. I take no credit for this invention, since any competent arithmetician could have replicated the labor. Beyond that modest contribution to the amelioration of the condition

Dear Mr. Williams,

In answering your letters I feel a bit like the wood-cutter in Theocritus, who stood musing at the woods, uncertain of which tree to fell first. I cannot

of mankind, I can not accurately be said to have invented anything.

The polygraph was actually invented by a man named John Hawkins, of Philadelphia, and my contributions to it consisted mostly in commissioning him to provide me with both desktop and laptop versions for myself, my friends, and foreign dignitaries. The polygraph enabled me to make copies of all that I wrote, thus effecting an enormous efficiency in time, but it did not in any way lessen the fundamental burden of correspondence, which has taken up somewhere between a tenth and a quarter of my life. You will forgive me for writing less frequently than you do, and for choosing with some care those topics to which I can make a useful contribution.

My attempts to produce grapes capable of pressing at Monticello have not borne fruit. Wine is the child of patience and perseverance, and though I count both among the principles of my existence, I have spent too few continuous days at Monticello to give viticulture the loving care that it so abundantly insists upon. For the moment we must be content to trade that which we have in surplus “our wheat, tobacco, and naval stores” for that which France produces in such eminent profusion, her wines. At some future date I hope that America and Virginia can be counted among the nations that produce fine wines. Meanwhile, I purchase Bordeaux whenever I can find merchants willing to advance me sufficient credit.

p.s. Thank you for your listing of the ways in which sport has shaped the characters of your recent Presidents. It shows. I find that games involving a ball and violence are not conducive to character building. For exercise I recommend vigorous walking, at mid-day if possible, and carrying a gun. The gun’s weight will increase the level of exercise and the possession of a gun on a walk produces real confidence.

I am, sir, your obedient servant,
Thomas Jefferson

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Dear President Jefferson,

Nice going on the plow. I hadn't thought about that sort of thing before and sure can't imagine the current president doing something like that either. Congratulations and... thanks!

All is going well here in Chicago. Our new \$600 million Millennium Park is coming in nicely in its second growing season and Michigan Avenue is flush with beautiful flowers, shops and people. My studio is at street level and I can see the hustle and bustle as I do my show.

We have been talking a lot lately about guns and what do you know, you say you liked to walk and better still, while packing heat. That last sentence about killed me: The possession of a gun on a walk produces real confidence.

If you ask me, we'd be a lot better off without guns. This is one of those controversial subjects that never seem to make any progress on talk radio. The pro-gun people see arming Americans as a right and a solution. People like me see them as the problem.

When a deranged student went on a killing spree at Virginia Tech, more than a few people called my show to say that if everyone on campus were armed that day, then fewer people would have died. What do you make of that?

I know this sounds like a constitutional question, but you knew those guys. Did the founding fathers want us to own guns and would they want us to own them now? Over 2-dozen students in the Chicago Public school system have been shot and killed THIS YEAR. None of them deserved that and most of them didn't even see it coming.

Sincerely,
John

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Dear Mr. Williams,

As I write this I can hear the workmen removing the roof from the lobby of Monticello. I had hoped to have completed construction on the house some fourteen years ago, but the press of work, particularly during my tenure as President, and a perpetual shortage of ready funds, impeded my fond hopes. I don't really mind living without a proper roof over my head for months at a time, but my daughter Martha finds it a bit trying, though the most severe of her comments has been that Mrs. Thornton was correct in calling my design work droll.

Nothing would induce me to retreat from my belief that a free man is a man with a gun. Here in America, with varmints in every cave, on every rill, at the base of many trees, with the Indians of the West constantly turned from their characteristic peacefulness to butchery and depredation by British agents, and with the constant threat of a general Negro insurrection, guns are a central tool of existence. You know, of course, that in my world a high-tech weapon is a single shot rifle that requires a full thirty seconds to reload. My young protégé Meriwether Lewis carried the best rifles of our time with him on his voyage into the interior of the continent. But even with four or six hunters in a coordinated phalanx, Mr. Lewis and his men on several occasions nearly became hors d'combat among the grizzly (more properly variegated) bears of upper Louisiana.

One of my three heroes Francis Bacon regarded the invention of gunpowder as one of the three greatest events of human history, along with the invention of the compass and the Gutenberg printing press. Gunpowder and the instruments which it propels have enabled civilization to extend its reach to the corners of the world. Guns are also profoundly democratic. The Goliaths of the world are now easily reduced to equality by men who by comparison are mere shrimps, and with a gun in hand the least brawny man is equal to the man of strongest sinew. In former ages, tyrants hired giants to serve as their praetorian guards and mercenaries. Today a monopoly on physical stature no longer confers power. In fact, the Brobdingnagians are now frequently just better targets for the average men who seek to regain their long-buried liberties.

Besides, government must never have a monopoly on the uses of force. Citizens must have the wherewithal to rebel when necessary, to shed blood in the streets when their liberty is at stake. The only thing worse than a lawless public is a public disarmed. Better that a few petty crimes occur from time to time than that we forsake our capacity to bring down corrupt or despotic governments. No, the Second Amendment is unambiguous. So long as the Bill of Rights exists at the center of American jurisprudence, we must adhere to the strictures of the Second Amendment, which contemplates no restrictions of ownership of guns.

I have just received a new copy of Andrea Palladio's, "Four Treatises on Architecture." I may stop reconstruction work until I can have absorbed the best science of architraves. It would be folly to proceed in the dark, like a creature in Plato's cave, when the sunlight of ancient architecture is so ready at hand.

I remain your obedient servant.

Thomas Jefferson