ON MARCH 4, 1809, in the newly completed hall of the House of Representatives, Thomas Jefferson attended the presidential inauguration of his friend and fellow Virginian, James Madison. Observers noted—they could hardly fail to, such were Jefferson's high spirits—that he was elated to be leaving public office. One week later, on March 11, Jefferson left Washington. He would never return. Indeed, in the remaining seventeen busy years of his life, he would never leave Virginia, or even venture far from Monticello.

Today, two and a half centuries after Jefferson's birth, I would like to consider this question: Is Jefferson still instructive to us? Or has he become a glittering anachronism, with little to say that is pertinent to our nation's current discontents?

These discontents are, essentially, of two kinds, and they are related. One is physical, the other is cultural and moral. But, then, it was an aspect of Jefferson's genius that he knew that the

These remarks were delivered at the University of Virginia in commemoration of the 250th anniversary of the birth of Thomas Jefferson.
elemental physical facts of social life have cultural, and hence moral, consequences. Our physical discontent is that we feel crowded together. Our cultural discontent is that this crowding gives rise to an uncomfortable sense of dependency.

Put plainly, we have become a nation of cities, and we are uneasy about this. We are uneasy not just because our cities are dismaying in so many ways. We also are uneasy because there echo in our national memory Jefferson's forebodings about urbanization.

Jefferson inveighed against cities at a time when the largest city in the nation, Philadelphia, had a population of 54,391 (about the size of Rapid City, South Dakota today). Jefferson's dislike of urban life was not merely an aesthetic recoil, although it was certainly that, too. His dislike flowed from his political philosophy, and reflected the radicalism of American political thought—the sharpness of our break from ancient patterns of political philosophizing.

**Rural virtues**

Jefferson is sometimes caricatured as a person who was optimistic to the point of simplemindedness. He did, indeed, have the innate confidence of a natural aristocrat, and the expansive intellectual expectation of progress that characterized the eighteenth century Enlightenment of which he was a conspicuous exemplar. But look at what he actually said about the problems of governance, and about the myriad lurking threats to the goodness of America.

Democracy, he said, depends on the nurturing of certain virtues in its citizens. But those virtues, and the strength of character that we recognize as true independence in individuals, depend, Jefferson warned, on a certain kind of social order. They depend, he said, on a rural society. Hence he warned against "piling up" people in cities. Cities are, he said, inherently and everywhere "pestilential." He exhorted Americans to let Europe have the cities—and, hence, the workshops, as well.

Jefferson was hardly unacquainted with metropolitan living. He lived with his customary flair and zest in the Paris of the 1780s—Paris fermenting with cultural and political upheaval. And having seen urban crowds abroad and at home, Jefferson still said "I am not among those who fear the people."

But let us not flinch from this fact. Cut the people off from connection with the land, from a life of rural husbandry, and
Jefferson's trust became as attenuated as he said the people's virtue must then become.

Jefferson believed that human nature presented political problems. But he believed that those problems could be ameliorated by nature itself—by the education in hardihood, independence, and various other virtues that comes from a life engaged in labor on the land.

**Ancients and moderns**

The contrast between Jefferson's political philosophy and the philosophies of the ancients is stark. The words civic, citizen, and city have a common root and classical political philosophy taught that man could only become civilized—literally made suitable for life in the city, and for citizenship—by the close proximity to and involvement with other people that is required by the life of a polity compact enough to be walked across in a day. Compactness was a necessary condition for the flourishing of a political community—or so said most political philosophers prior to America's Founders.

Jefferson's, and America's, break with that classical tradition was complete. Jefferson wanted space not only between the citizen and the government, but also between citizens. Hence the alacrity with which he leapt at the opportunity to make the Louisiana Purchase for our suddenly very "extensive Republic." So from the beginning, American virtue was linked with space, meaning room enough for Americans to develop the virtues that undergird personal independence.

Classical political philosophy taught that the fulfillment of human life depended on active engagement in the civil, the political life of the country. Jefferson lived such a life. But he did not live it contentedly, or even happily, and he did not recommend it. To him, political engagement was a duty to be done, but not a career to be sought, still less a pleasure to be relished.

Again, remember the undisguised pleasure Jefferson took from shaking the dust of Washington from his shoes. Government, he knew, should not be at the center of American life, or at the center of the life of any American who could honorably avoid it. Serving in government can be a duty; but distrust anyone who does it for pleasure. In 1813, speaking after what he called "an intimacy of forty years with the public councils and characters,"
he said: "An honest man can feel no pleasure in the exercise of power over his fellow citizens."

A distinguished historian, John P. Diggins, rightly says that American political thought, both liberal and conservative, has emphasized *homo faber*—man as a creature fulfilled in, and improved by, work. American political thought has not emphasized *homo politicus*—man as the classical philosophers understood him, as a creature fulfilled and improved through participation in politics. In American political thought, and especially in Jefferson's thought, it is work, which takes place in the private sphere of life, and not politics in the public sphere, that is the primary source of American dignity.

In this regard, Lincoln was squarely in the Jeffersonian tradition. Lincoln came (in the words of his campaign song) "out of the wilderness, out in Illinois." Back then, people still spoke of "the Illinois frontier." Lincoln came from where people were grappling with nature, subduing it, fulfilling their (and the nation's) manifest destiny in work.

As Diggins notes, American literature reflects—and reinforces—this national yearning for private space in which to work out one's personal destiny. James Fenimore Cooper in the forest, Herman Melville at sea, Mark Twain on the Mississippi, Thoreau by his pond, all expressed an American—a Jeffersonian—faith in virtue developed without dependence on political engagement, or even on "society."

Few people in contemporary America have even an inkling of what that cowboy from Manhattan, Teddy Roosevelt, called "the iron desolation" of the Great Plains. What Willa Cather of Red Cloud, the novelist from Nebraska, called "the inconceivable silence of the plains," is indeed, inconceivable to most modern Americans who are enveloped by the cacophony of metropolitan living. Time was when an American leatherstocking could—and would—pack up and head west when he could hear the sound of his nearest neighbor's ax. No more. Now we need to work on our neighborliness, and come to terms with living in close proximity to one another.

The continent that our continental republic spans is certainly not densely populated by Old World standards. But, then, those

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have never been our standards. And because so many Americans now live in close contact—social and economic—with other Americans, there seems to be a kind of national claustrophobia. It is making people increasingly irritable. Intellectually and emotionally we are all Jefferson's children, and we are feeling cramped. We are throwing elbows, figuratively speaking, and speaking the aggressive language of rights, asserting myriad rights against one another in a jostle for social space.

We are now much in need of a translation of Jeffersonian philosophy for our urban situation. We need a new vernacular, not only, or even primarily, of politics, but also of civil society. That is, of all those intermediary and voluntary associations that leaven life and mediate between the individual and the state. A Jeffersonianism for our times would speak to the problem of defining, and valuing, and attaining personal independence "down town," in the city, far from the frontier and farms where the original idea of the independent American was defined.

**Death of the frontier**

It is serendipitous that the 250th anniversary of Jefferson's birth is also the 100th anniversary of the most seminal essay ever written on American historiography. Delivered in 1893 at the American Historical Association, it was Frederick Jackson Turner's "The Significance of the Frontier in American History."

Three years earlier the Bureau of the Census had declared the frontier closed. Turner considered that declaration momentous, and potentially ominous. He believed that American democratic values—nothing less than what was best in the nation's character—had been shaped by the availability of western lands. So what would become of us now, our saving spaces being exhausted?

Turner said, "In the spirit of a pioneer's 'house raising'"—voluntary cooperation in the private realm—"lives the salvation of the Republic." What would become of an America in which pioneering was a thing of the past?

Prior to the American Founding, the pedigree of republican institutions had been traced back to ancient ideas. But Turner, drawing on and deepening the Jeffersonian tradition, was intimating a new declaration of independence from the Old World; he was attempting to ground American republicanism quite literally on the ground, in the vastness of the American land.
Turner's "geographical" understanding of American history was squarely in the Jeffersonian tradition. But his paper was delivered in a distinctly un-Jeffersonian setting, one that would have given Jefferson an anxiety attack, if not vertigo.

When Turner addressed the American Historical Association, the meeting was in Chicago, drawn there by the great Columbian Exposition. That exposition had opened in October 1892, to commemorate the 400th anniversary of the coming of Columbus, and to celebrate in its exhibitions of technological and industrial marvels, the triumph of the will of man over the resistant material of nature in the New World.

It was at the Chicago Exposition, in the Gallery of Machines, that Henry Adams said he felt himself knocked prostrate, "his historical neck broken by the sudden eruption of forces totally new." It was because of new forces surging through society that, early in the twentieth century, many thoughtful Americans (Herbert Croley for one; Walter Lippmann for another) thought Jeffersonian individualism was no longer an answer to American problems, but rather had become the problem.

The problem, they thought, had two facets. One facet was the weakness of government. The challenge was to strengthen the state so that it could tame the surging energies of industrialism. The other facet of the problem was to temper American individualism so that a spirit of community could flourish. For these ends, the state has been expanding through most of this century.

The twentieth century has been the century of the state. Government has grown everywhere. However, as this weary century wends to a close, there is a fresh receptivity to the core conviction of Jeffersonianism, a fresh appreciation of the primacy of the private sphere of life.

Jefferson focuses our attention on the task of building a society that nurtures individuals to self-sufficiency, including independence of politics. Now more than ever we need to be focused on that task of nurturing, because the related forces of urbanization and statism are exerting a powerful pull toward an enervating dependency. It is a dependency on large economic entities, and on government, for security. Ultimately, it is dependency on—an addiction to—security as the highest aim of life. This addiction produces, over time, a timid, fearful, debased people, erecting barriers against a competitive world, and expressing an entitlement mentality, insisting that they are entitled to govern-
ment protection from uncertainty. That is an entitlement with a steep moral cost. Government that acknowledges that entitlement becomes a bland Leviathan, a soft, kindly meant but ultimately corrupting statism, a statism of benighted benevolence.

A new path

The Washington that Jefferson fled has, in our time, become an agency of dependency. So a sensible first step would be to restore the wrecked equilibrium of our federal system. From Jefferson's era until well into this century, political debate in Washington about what Washington should do about this or that began with examination of the question of whether Washington should do anything—whether the federal government was constitutionally entitled to act.

Some people will say that the constitutional question is firmly closed. They will say that the "living document" has "evolved," and for many decades now has been consistently construed to emancipate the federal government from any serious restraint on its latitude for action. That is, alas, true. By construing the Constitution in a way that enables the federal government to act everywhere, we have taught Americans to think that it is natural and right for the federal government to take custody of every problem, to organize the provision of every need, and to satisfy every want.

I know an accomplished fact when I see one; I can face facts of constitutional construction even when I regret them. But what I am recommending is not a constitutional but a prudential inhibition on the central government. After all, it is not as though the federal government today has excess resources of energy, intelligence, and money. It is not as though the federal government is conspicuously successful at all its undertakings.

So, it would be an act of fidelity to Jeffersonianism to revive the idea of states' rights—and states' responsibilities.

Now, I know some people wince when they hear the phrase "states' rights." I understand. Let me tell a story.

Shelby Foote, in the second volume of his magisterial three-volume history of the Civil War, recounts a story concerning a Virginian, General George Thomas, who served in the Union Army. Immediately after the bloody assault on Missionary Ridge

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in the Battle of Chattanooga, General Thomas discerned an attractive spot for a military cemetery, and put a detail to work on the project. The chaplain in charge asked Thomas if the dead were to be buried in plots assigned to the states their units represented, as was done at Gettysburg, where Lincoln had briefly spoken at a cemetery dedication a few weeks earlier. General Thomas lowered his head in thought, then shook it decisively. Making a tumbling gesture with both hands, he said, "No, no; mix 'em up. I'm tired of states' rights."

Today Americans old enough to remember America's great domestic conflicts over race relations in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s may well say, as Thomas did, that they want to hear no more about states' rights. But it is well to remember that an idea should not be discredited merely by the fact that it has been put to ignoble uses. (The history of Christianity, and other great religions, is instructive in this regard.)

It is also well to remember that in 1800, when our country still had not spilled westward over the Alleghenies, Jefferson wrote: "Our country is too large to have all its affairs directed by a single government." So let us send more political power back to where Jefferson thought it belonged, to the state and local—very local—levels. Even more important, let us get politics to the periphery of American life, where Jefferson wanted it.

To do so we will have to resist and reverse powerful tendencies in modern history, tendencies that tend to recur. Indeed, the mind of the West has long been haunted by the fear that history is, or tends to be—and will be if we are not careful—cyclical. The fear is that powerful forces, even the very logic of social development, propel societies into cycles of decay and—if society is resourceful—regeneration. But decay is more probable than regeneration.

Contradictions cultural and political

Although America's Founders were firm believers that history could be linear—that progress is possible—they knew that progress was not inevitable. And some of them had anxieties that have an astonishingly modern ring to them.

In December 1819, John Adams, an old adversary who had become a friendly correspondent, wrote the following to Jefferson:
"Will you tell me how to prevent riches from being the effects of temperance and industry? Will you tell me how to prevent riches from producing luxury? Will you tell me how to prevent luxury from producing effeminacy, intoxication, extravagance, vice and folly?"

What was worrying Adams, and Jefferson too, has come to be known in our day as the "cultural contradiction of capitalism." The worry is that capitalism, by its very success, by its prodigious productivity, undermines the social and moral prerequisites for its continued success. The worry is that capitalism requires thrift, discipline, industriousness, and deferral of gratifications; but capitalism by its prodigal success in making Americans a people of plenty, may be subverting those very virtues, making us soft and self-indulgent.

Just as there can be a "cultural contradiction of capitalism," so, too, there can be a political contradiction of democracy. It is this: The very responsiveness of democratic government to the popular will can corrupt the popular will. The more that government tries to satisfy the appetites of particular groups, the more appetites are inflamed, and the more groups organize to make their demands felt. So the very virtues that democracy presupposes—individualism, self-restraint, and self-reliance—are subverted, over time, by the very solicitousness of democratic government. That subversion is in a very advanced stage today in the city Jefferson left for good 184 years ago.

We have not been properly mindful of Jefferson's warnings about the tendency of government to swell; and the tendency of the central government in a federal system to absorb other governments' responsibilities and rights; and the tendency of politics to permeate life, constricting the private sphere of life. But these tendencies are only that—only tendencies, not inevitabilities. So let us resolve to honor Jefferson by resisting the increasing dependencies in our urban society, dependencies on government and politics. We Americans are a relentlessly forward-looking people, but let us learn to live looking back over our shoulders, back to Jefferson for guidance.

Fitzgerald's lament

Among the most moving passages in American literature is one, familiar to all, that echoes with what can be called Jeffersonian melancholy. It is the ending of F. Scott Fitzgerald's
The Great Gatsby. The narrator, Nick Carraway, is standing at night on a lawn on the Long Island shore. He says:

And as the moon rose higher the inessential houses began to melt away until gradually I became aware of the old island here that flowered once for Dutch sailors’ eyes—a fresh green breast of the new world. Its vanished trees, the trees that had made way for Gatsby’s house, had once pandered in whispers to the last and greatest of all human dreams; for a transitory enchanted moment man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent, compelled into an aesthetic contemplation he neither understood nor desired, face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder.

I call this melancholy Jeffersonianism. It is Jeffersonian because it recalls the immense promise implicit in America’s space. It is melancholy because it suggests that the great dream, that of being worthy of the promise, was transitory, and has passed. But it need not be so.

Jefferson’s generation came many generations after the Dutch sailors’ eyes first fell on our continent, but Jefferson’s generation, too, held its breath, fully feeling it was face to face with a responsibility as large as the continent. In our time the sense of freshness is gone. The houses and the cities—these human handprints on the land—are not insubstantial and will not melt away. But we should not want them to. These most un-Jeffersonian things—our cities—can be made more civilized if we rededicate ourselves to the most Jeffersonian of values, personal independence, beginning with education and finding fruition in work. The Jeffersonian legacy can live downtown.

For just one more moment let us rejoin Nick Carraway on Gatsby’s lawn by the Long Island shore. His mind is on what he calls “the vast obscurity beyond the city, where the vast fields of the republic rolled on under the night.” Fitzgerald’s masterpiece concludes with these words: “And so we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.”

The past has us in its grip. But that is our good fortune because Thomas Jefferson is a large component of our useable past. So let us beat against the current, the modern current of statism and dependency that, if unresisted, will bear us farther and farther away from Jefferson’s still vital vision of our Republic.