

Thomas Jefferson to George Washington, August 28, 1790, Response to Questions Stated in President's Note, from the Works of Thomas Jefferson in Twelve Volumes. Federal Edition. Collected and Edited by Paul Leicester Ford.

OPINION ON COURSE OF UNITED STATES TOWARDS GREAT BRITAIN AND SPAIN¹

1 Washington had written Jefferson:

“ United States, August 27, 1790.

“Provided the dispute between Great Britain and Spain should come to the decision of arms, from a variety of circumstances (individually unimportant and inconclusive, but very much the reverse when compared and combined), there is no doubt in my mind, that New Orleans, and the Spanish posts above it on the Mississippi, will be among the first attempts of the former; and that the reduction of them will be undertaken by a combined operation from Detroit.

“The *consequences* of having so formidable and enterprising a people as the British on both our flanks and rear, with their navy in front, as they respect our western settlements which may be seduced thereby, as they regard the security of the Union and its commerce with the West Indies, are too obvious to need enumeration.

Library of Congress

“What then should be the answer of the Executive of the United States to Lord Dorchester, in case he should apply for permission to march troops through the territory of the said States from Detroit to the Mississippi?”

“What notice ought to be taken of the measure, if it should be undertaken without leave, which is the most probable proceeding of the two?”

“The opinion of the Secretary of State is requested in writing upon the above statements.”

[Aug. 28, 1790]

Opinion upon the question what the answer of the President should be in case Lord Dorchester should apply for permission to march troops through the territory off the United States, from Detroit to the Mississippi.

I am so deeply impressed with the magnitude of the dangers which will attend our government, if Louisiana and the Floridas be added to the British empire, that, in my opinion, we ought to make ourselves parties in the *general war* expected to take place, should this be the only means of preventing the calamity.

But I think we should defer this step as long as possible; because war is full of chances, which may relieve us from the necessity of interfering; and if necessary, still the later we interfere, the better we shall be prepared.

It is often indeed more easy to prevent the capture of a place, than to retake it. Should it be so in the case in question, the difference between the two operations of preventing and retaking, will not be so costly as two, three, or four years more of war.

So that I am for preserving neutrality as long, and entering into the war as late, as possible.

Library of Congress

If this be the best course, it decides, in a good degree, what should be our conduct, if the British ask leave to march troops through our territory, or march them without leave.

It is well enough agreed, in the laws of nations, that for a neutral power to give or refuse permission to the troops of either belligerent party to pass through their territory, is no breach of neutrality, provided the same refusal or permission be extended to the other party.

If we give leave of passage then to the British troops, Spain will have no just cause of complaint against us, provided we extend the same leave

to her when demanded.

If we refuse, (as indeed we have a right to do,) and the troops should pass notwithstanding, of which there can be little doubt, we shall stand committed. For either we must enter immediately into the war, or pocket an acknowledged insult in the face of the world; and one insult pocketed soon produces another.

There is indeed a middle course, which I should be inclined to prefer; that is, to avoid giving any answer. They will proceed notwithstanding, but to do this under our silence, will admit of palliation, and produce apologies, from military necessity; and will leave us free to pass it over without dishonor, or to make it a handle of quarrel hereafter, if we should have use for it as such. But, if we are obliged to give an answer, I think the occasion not such as should induce us to hazard that answer which might commit us to the war at so early a stage of it; and therefore that the passage should be permitted.

If they should pass without having asked leave, I should be for expressing our dissatisfaction to the British court, and keeping alive an altercation on the subject, till

Library of Congress

events should decide whether it is most expedient to accept their apologies, or profit of the aggression as a cause of war.