

Thomas Jefferson to James Wilkinson, January 3, 1807, from The Works of Thomas Jefferson in Twelve Volumes. Federal Edition. Collected and Edited by Paul Leicester Ford.

TO THE GOVERNOR OF NEW ORLEANS J. MSS. (JAMES WILKINSON.)

Washington, January 3, 1807.

Dear Sir, I had intended yesterday to recommend to General Dearborne the writing to you weekly by post, to convey information of our western affairs, so long as they are interesting, because it is possible, though not probable, you might sometimes get the information quicker this way than down the river, but the General received yesterday information of the death of his son in the East Indies, and of course cannot now attend to business. I therefore write you a hasty line for the present week, and send it in duplicate by the Athens and the Nashville routes.

The information in the enclosed paper, as to proceedings in the State of Ohio, is correct. Blennerhasset's flotilla of fifteen boats and two hundred barrels of provisions, is seized, and there can be no doubt that Tyler's flotilla is also taken, because, on the 17th of December, we know there was a sufficient force assembled at Cincinnati to intercept it there, and another party was in pursuit of it on the river above. We are assured that these two flotillas composed the whole of the boats, provided Blennerhasset and Tyler had fled down the river.

I do not believe that the number of persons engaged for Burr has ever amounted to five hundred, though some have carried them to one thousand or fifteen hundred. A part of these were engaged as settlers of Bastrop's land, but the greater part of these were

Library of Congress

engaged under the express assurance that the projected enterprise was against Mexico, and secretly authorized by this government. Many were expressly enlisted in the name of the United States. The proclamation which reached Pittsburgh, December 2d, and the other parts of the river successively, undeceived both these classes, and of course drew them off, and I have never seen any proof of their having assembled more than forty men in two boats from Beaver, fifty in Tyler's flotilla, and the boatmen of Blennerhasset's. I believe therefore that the enterprise may be considered as crushed, but we are not to relax in our attentions until we hear what has passed at Louisville. If everything from that place upwards be successfully arrested, there is nothing from below that is to be feared. Be assured that Tennessee, and particularly General Jackson, are faithful. The orders lodged at Massac and the Chickasaw bluffs, will probably secure the interception of such fugitives from justice as may escape from Louisville, so that I think you will never see one of them. Still I would not wish, till we hear from Louisville, that you should relax your preparations in the least, except so far as to dispense with the militia of Mississippi and Orleans leaving their homes under our order of November 25th. Only let them consider

themselves under requisition, and be in a state of readiness should any force, too great for your regulars, escape down the river. You will have been sensible that those orders were given while we supposed you were on the Sabine, and the supposed crisis did not admit the formality of their being passed through you. We had considered Fort Adams as the place to make a stand, because it covered the mouth of the Red river. You have preferred New Orleans on the apprehension of a fleet from the West Indies. Be assured there is not any foundation for such an expectation, but the lying exaggerations of those traitors to impose on others and swell their pretended means. The very man whom they represented to you as gone to Jamaica, and to bring the fleet, has never been from home, and has regularly communicated to me everything which had passed between Burr and him. No such proposition was ever hazarded to him. France or Spain would not send a fleet to take Vera Cruz; and though one of the expeditions now near arriving from England, is probably for Vera Cruz, and perhaps already there, yet the state of things between us

Library of Congress

renders it impossible they should countenance an enterprise unauthorized by us. Still I repeat that these grounds of security must not stop our proceedings or preparations until they are further confirmed. Go on, therefore, with your works for the defence of New Orleans, because they will always be useful, only looking to what should

be permanent rather than means merely temporary. You may expect further information as we receive it, and though I expect it will be such as will place us at our ease, yet we must not place ourselves so until it be certain, but act on the possibility that the resources of our enemy may be greater and deeper than we are yet informed.

Your two confidential messengers delivered their charges safely. One arrived yesterday only with your letter of November 12th. The oral communications he made me are truly important. I beseech you to take the most special care of the two letters which he mentioned to me, the one in cypher, the other from another of the conspirators of high standing, and to send them to me by the first conveyance you can trust. It is necessary that all important testimony should be brought to one centre, in order that the guilty may be convicted, and the innocent left untroubled. Accept my friendly salutations, and assurances of great esteem and respect.¹

¹ On Feb. 3, 1807, Jefferson wrote Wilkinson:

“ Sir,—A returning express gives me an opportunity of acknowledging the receipt of your letters of Nov. 12, Dec. 9, 14, 18, 25, 26, and Jan. 2. I wrote to you Jan. 3, and through Mr. Briggs, Jan. 10. The former being written while the Secretary at War was unable to attend to business, gave you the state of the information we then possessed as to Burr's conspiracy. I now enclose you a message, containing a complete history of it from the commencement down to the eve of his departure from Nashville; & two subsequent messages shewed that he began his descent of the Mississippi Jany 1, with 10 boats, from 80 to 100 men of his party, navigated by 60 oarsmen not at all of his party. This, I think, is fully the force with which he will be able to meet your gun-boats; and as I think he

Library of Congress

was uninformed of your proceedings, & could not get the information till he would reach Natchez, I am in hopes that before this date he is in your possession. Although we at no time believed he could carry any formidable force out of the Ohio, yet we thought it safest that you should be prepared to receive him with all the force which could be assembled, and with that view our orders were given; and we were pleased to see that without waiting for them, you adopted nearly the same plan yourself, and acted on it with promptitude; the difference between yours & ours proceeding from your expecting an attack by sea, which we knew was impossible, either by England or by a fleet under Truxton, who was at home; or by our own navy, which was under our own eye. Your belief that Burr would really descend with 6. or 7000 men, was no doubt founded on what you know of the numbers which could be raised in the Western country for an expedition to Mexico, *under the authority of the government*; but you probably did not calculate that the want of that authority would take from him every honest man, & leave him only the desperadoes of his party, which in no part of the Ud S can ever be a numerous body. In approving, therefore, as we do approve, of the defensive operations for N Orleans, we are obliged to estimate them, not according to our own view of the danger, but to place ourselves in your situation, & only with your information. Your sending here Swartwout & Bollman, and adding to them Burr, Blennerhasset, & Tyler, should they fall into your hands, will be supported by the public opinion. As to Alexander, who is arrived, and Ogden expected, the evidence yet received will not be sufficient to commit them. I hope, however you will not extend this deportation to persons against whom there is only suspicion, or shades of offence not strongly marked. In that case, I fear the public sentiment would desert you; because, seeing no danger here, violations of law are felt with strength. I have thought it just to give you these views of the sentiments & sensations here, as they may enlighten your path. I am thoroughly sensible of the painful difficulties of your situation, expecting an attack from an overwhelming force, unversed in law, surrounded by suspected persons, & in a nation tender as to everything infringing liberty, & especially from the military. You have doubtless seen a good deal of malicious insinuation in the papers against you. This, of course, begot suspicion and distrust in those unacquainted with the line of your conduct. We, who knew

Library of Congress

it have not failed to strengthen the public confidence in you; and I can assure you that your conduct, as now known, has placed you on ground extremely favorable with the public. Burr and his emissaries found it convenient to sow a distrust in your mind of our dispositions towards you; but be assured that you will be cordially supported in the line of your duties. I pray you to send me D.'s original letter, communicated through Briggs, by the first entirely safe conveyance. Accept my friendly salutations & assurances of esteem & respect.”

On June 21, 1807, he again wrote to Wilkinson:

“ Dear Sir,—I received last night yours of the 16th, and sincerely congratulate you on your safe arrival at Richmond, against the impudent surmises & hopes of the band of conspirators, who, because they are as yet permitted to walk abroad, and even to be in the character of witnesses until such a measure of evidence shall be collected as will place them securely at the bar of justice, attempt to cover their crimes under noise and insolence. You have indeed had a fiery trial at New Orleans, but it was soon apparent that the clamorous were only the criminal, endeavoring to turn the public attention from themselves & their leader upon any other object.

“Having delivered to the Attorney Genl all the papers I possessed, respecting Burr & his accomplices, when he went to Richmond, I could only write to him (without knowing whether he was at Philadelphia, Wilmington, or Delaware) for your letter of Oct 21, desired by the court. If you have a copy of it, and chuse to give it in, it will, I think, have a good effect; for it was my intention, if I should receive it from Mr. Rodney, not to communicate it without your consent, after I learnt your arrival. Mr. Rodney will certainly either bring or send it within the course of a day or two, and it will be instantly forwarded to Mr. Hay. For the same reason, I cannot send the letter of J. P. D., as you propose, to Mr. Hay. I do not recollect what name these initials indicate, but the paper, whatever it is, must be in the hands of Mr. Rodney. Not so as to your letter to Dayton; for as that could be of no use in the prosecution, & was reserved to be forwarded or not, according to circumstances,

Library of Congress

I retained it in my own hands, & now return it to you. If you think Dayton's son should be summoned, it can only be done from Richmond. We have no subpoenas here. Within about a month we shall leave this to place ourselves in healthier stations. Before that I trust you will be liberated from your present attendance. It would have been of great importance to have had you here with the Secretary of War, because I am very anxious to begin such works as will render Plaquemine impregnable, and an insuperable barrier to the passage of any force up or down the river. But the Secretary at War sets out on Wednesday, to meet with some other persons at New York, and determine on the works necessary to be undertaken to put that place *hors d'insulte*, & thence he will have to proceed northwardly, I believe. I must ask you, at your leisure, to state to me in writing what you think will answer our views at Plaquemine, within the limits of expense which we can contemplate, & of which you can form a pretty good idea.

“Your enemies have filled the public ear with slanders, & your mind with trouble on that account. The establishment of their guilt will let the world see what they ought to think of their clamors; it will dissipate the doubts of those who doubted for want of knolege, and will place you on higher ground in the public estimate and public confidence. No one is more sensible than myself of the injustice which has been aimed at you. Accept, I pray you, my salutations, & assurances of respect & esteem.”