

Thomas Jefferson to James Monroe, February 4, 1816 , from The Works of Thomas Jefferson in Twelve Volumes. Federal Edition. Collected and Edited by Paul Leicester Ford.

TO JAMES MONROE J. MSS.

Monticello, February 4, 1816.

Dear Sir, —Your letter concerning that of General Scott is received, and his is now returned. I am very thankful for these communications. From forty years' experience of the wretched guess-work of the newspapers of what is not done in open daylight, and of their falsehood even as to that, I rarely think them worth reading, and almost never worth notice. A ray, therefore, now and then, from the fountain of light, is like sight restored to the blind. It tells me where I am; and that to a mariner who has long been without sight of land or sun, is a rallying of reckoning which places him at ease. The ground you have taken with Spain is sound in every part. It is the true ground, especially, as to the South Americans. When subjects are able to maintain themselves in the field, they are then an independent power as to all neutral nations, are entitled to their commerce, and to protection within their limits. Every kindness which can be shown the South Americans, every friendly office and aid within the limits of the law of nations, I would extend to them, without fearing Spain or her Swiss auxiliaries. For this is but an assertion of our own independence. But to join in their war, as General Scott proposes, and to which even some members of Congress seem to squint, is what we ought not to do as yet. On the question of our interest in their independence, were that alone a sufficient motive of action, much may be said on both sides. When they are free, they will drive every article of our produce from every market, by underselling it, and change the condition of our

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existence, forcing us into other habits and pursuits. We shall, indeed, have in exchange some commerce with them, but in what I know not, for we shall have nothing to offer which they cannot raise cheaper; and their separation from Spain seals our everlasting peace with her. On the other hand, so long as they are dependent, Spain, from

her jealousy, is our natural enemy, and always in either open or secret hostility with us. These countries, too, in war, will be a powerful weight in her scale, and, in peace, totally shut to us. Interest then, on the whole, would wish their independence, and justice makes the wish a duty. They have a right to be free, and we a right to aid them, as a strong man has a right to assist a weak one assailed by a robber or murderer. That a war is brewing between us and Spain cannot be doubted. When that disposition is matured on both sides, and open rapture can no longer be deferred, then will be the time for our joining the South Americans, and entering into treaties of alliance with them. There will then be but one opinion, at home or abroad, that we shall be justifiable in choosing to have them with us, rather than against us. In the meantime, they will have organized regular governments, and perhaps have formed themselves into one or more confederacies; more than one I hope, as in single mass they would be a very formidable neighbor. The geography of their country seems to indicate three: 1. What is north of the Isthmus. 2. What is south of it on the Atlantic; and 3. The southern part on the Pacific. In this form, we might be the balancing power. *A propos* of the dispute with Spain, as to the boundary of Louisiana. On our acquisition of that country, there was found in possession of the family of the late Governor Messier, a most valuable and original MS. history of the settlement of Louisiana by the French, written by Bernard de la Harpe, a principal agent through the whole of it. It commences with the first permanent settlement of 1699, (that by de la Salle in 1684, having been broken up,) and continues to 1723, and shows clearly the continual claim of France to the Province of Texas, as far as the Rio Bravo, and to all the waters running into the Mississippi, and how, by the roguery of St. Denis, an agent of Crozat the merchant, to whom the colony was granted for ten years,

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the settlements of the Spaniards at Nacadoches, Adais, Assinays, and Natchitoches, were fraudulently invited and connived at. Crozat's object was commerce, and especially contraband, with the Spaniards, and these posts were settled as convenient smuggling stages on the way to Mexico. The history bears such marks of authenticity as place it beyond question. Governor Claiborne obtained the MS. for us, and thinking it too hazardous to risk its loss by the way, unless a copy were retained, he had a copy taken. The original having arrived safe at Washington, he sent me the copy, which I now have. Is the original still in your office? or was it among the papers burnt by the British? If lost, I will send you my copy; if preserved, it is my wish to deposit the copy for safe keeping with the Philosophical Society at Philadelphia, where it will be safer than on my shelves. I do not mean that any part of this letter shall give to yourself the trouble of an answer; only desire Mr. Graham to see if the original still exists in your office, and to drop me a line saying yea or nay; and I shall know what to do. Indeed the MS. ought to be printed, and I see a note to my copy which shows it has been in contemplation, and that it was computed to be of twenty sheets at sixteen dollars a sheet, for three hundred and twenty copies, which would sell at one dollar apiece, and reimburse the expense. * * *