

Primary Source: Thomas Jefferson on Manufacturing and Commerce ^[1]

During and after the Revolution, American leaders worried about whether their new form of government would survive. A republic was based on the decisions of the people, and so (it was believed) the people must be willing to put the common good ahead of their own private self-interest. We still talk about these same issues today — in almost any important political debate, someone will say that people should “rise above partisanship.”

Many people — including Thomas Jefferson, as you’ll read here — believed that small, self-sufficient farmers made the best citizens of a republic. They saw farmers as harder working, more moral, and more trustworthy than other people. This is a very old idea, and you can still hear it sometimes in political debates today.

Americans in the 1790s were split over whether the new nation should remain mostly agricultural or develop industry and commerce. The opposing view, held by Federalists, was that the nation should build industry and commerce so that it would not be dependent on Europe. Both sides wanted to expand independence, but Jefferson and the Republicans thought in terms of personal independence, whereas the Federalists thought in terms of national independence.

In the South, especially, people agreed with Jefferson, and the South remained almost entirely agricultural until after the Civil War.

In 1780, François de Barbé Marbois, a French diplomat in Philadelphia, sent a series of questions to officials of each of the thirteen states. His goal was to learn more about the natural resources, economies, and people of the states so that he could report back to France.

The questions to Virginia were forwarded to Thomas Jefferson, who was then governor of Virginia. Jefferson wrote a detailed response to each of Marbois’ questions, and in 1784 his “notes on the state of Virginia” were published as a book.

In this section, Jefferson answers Marbois’ question about “the present state of manufactures, commerce, interior and exterior trade.” In it, he argues that Virginia should not focus on developing industry but should remain agricultural.

Notes on the State of Virginia

We never had an interior trade of any importance. Our exterior [commerce](#) ^[2] has suffered very much from the beginning of [the present contest](#). During this time we have manufactured within our families the most necessary articles of cloathing. Those of cotton will bear some comparison with the same kinds of manufacture in Europe; but those of wool, flax and hemp are very coarse, unsightly, and unpleasant: and such is our attachment to agriculture, and such our preference for foreign manufactures, that be it wise or unwise, our people will certainly return as soon as they can, to the raising raw materials, and exchanging them for finer manufactures than they are able to execute themselves. [The political economists of Europe have established it as a principle that every state should endeavour to manufacture for itself](#): and this principle, like many others, we transfer to America, without calculating the difference of circumstance which should often produce a difference of result. In Europe the lands are either [cultivated](#) ^[3], or [locked up against the cultivator](#). Manufacture must therefore be resorted to of necessity not of choice, to support the [surplus](#) ^[5] of their people. But we have an [immensity](#) ^[6] of land [courting](#) ^[7] the industry of the [husbandman](#) ^[8]. Is it best then that all our citizens should be employed in its improvement, or that one half should be called off from that to exercise manufactures and handicraft arts for the other? [Those who labour in the earth are the chosen people of God](#) if ever he had a chosen people, whose breasts he has made his [peculiar](#) ^[9] deposit for substantial and genuine [virtue](#) ^[10]. It is the focus in which he keeps alive that [sacred](#) ^[11] fire, which otherwise might escape from the face of the earth. Corruption of morals in the mass of cultivators is a phaenomenon of which no age nor nation has furnished an example. It is the mark set on those, who not looking up to heaven, to their own soil and industry, as does the husbandman, for their [subsistence](#) ^[12], depend for it on the casualties and [caprice](#) ^[13] of customers. [Dependance](#) ^[14] [begets](#) ^[14] [subservience](#) ^[15] and [venality](#) ^[16], suffocates the germ of virtue, and prepares fit tools for the designs of ambition. This, the natural progress and consequence of the arts, has sometimes perhaps been retarded by accidental circumstances: but, generally speaking, the proportion which the [aggregate](#) ^[17] of the other classes of citizens bears in any state to that of its husbandmen, is the proportion of its unsound to its healthy parts, and is a good-enough barometer whereby to measure its degree of corruption. While we have land to labour then, let us never wish to see our citizens occupied at a work-bench, or twirling a [distaff](#) ^[18]. Carpenters, masons, smiths, are wanting in husbandry: but, for the general operations of manufacture, let our work-shops remain in Europe. It is better to carry provisions and materials to workmen there, than bring them to the provisions and materials, and with them their manners and principles. The loss by the transportation of [commodities](#) ^[19] across the Atlantic will be made up in happiness and permanence of government. The mobs of great cities add just so much to the support of pure government, as sores do to the strength of the human body. It is the manners and spirit of a people which preserve a republic in [vigour](#) ^[20]. A degeneracy in these is a [canker](#) ^[21] which soon eats to the heart of its laws and constitution.

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