

Thomas Jefferson and the National Debt

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Thomas Jefferson's View: Loading up the nation with debt and leaving it for the following generations to pay is morally irresponsible. Excessive debt is a means by which governments oppress the people and waste their substance. No nation has a right to contract debt for periods longer than the majority contracting it can expect to live.

"I sincerely believe... that the principle of spending money to be paid by posterity under the name of funding is but swindling futurity on a large scale." --Thomas Jefferson to John Taylor, 1816. ME 15:23

"I wish it were possible to obtain a single amendment to our Constitution. I would be willing to depend on that alone for the reduction of the administration of our government; I mean an additional article taking from the Federal Government the power of borrowing. I now deny their power of making paper money or anything else a legal tender. I know that to pay all proper expenses within the year would, in case of war, be hard on us. But not so hard as ten wars instead of one. For wars could be reduced in that proportion; besides that the State governments would be free to lend *their credit* in borrowing quotas." --Thomas Jefferson to John Taylor, 1798. ME 10:64

The Limits on Contracting Debt

"Then I say, the earth belongs to each of these generations during its course, fully and in its own right. The second generation receives it clear of the debts and incumbrances of the first, the third of the second, and so on. For if the first could charge it with a debt, then the earth would belong to the dead and not to the living generation. Then, no generation can contract debts greater than may be paid during the course of its own existence." --Thomas Jefferson to James Madison, 1789. ME 7:455, Papers 15:393

"The conclusion then, is, that neither the representatives of a nation, nor the whole nation itself assembled, can validly engage debts beyond what they may pay in their own time." --Thomas Jefferson to James Madison, 1789. ME 7:457, Papers 15:398n

"I suppose that the received opinion, that the public debts of one generation devolve on the next, has been suggested by our seeing, habitually, in private life, that he who succeeds to lands is required to pay the debts of his predecessor; without considering that this requisition is municipal only, not moral, flowing from the will of the society, which has found it convenient to appropriate the lands of a decedent on the condition of a payment of his debts; but that between society and society, or generation and generation, there is no municipal obligation, no umpire but the law of nature." --Thomas Jefferson to James Madison, 1789. ME 7:458, Papers 15:395

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"Funding I consider as limited, rightfully, to a redemption of the debt within the lives of a majority of the generation contracting it; every generation coming equally, by the laws of the Creator of the world, to the free possession of the earth He made for their subsistence, unincumbered by their predecessors, who, like them, were but tenants for life." --Thomas Jefferson to John Taylor, 1816. ME 15:18

Saddling Posterity with Debt

"We believe--or we act as if we believed--that although an individual father cannot alienate the labor of his son, the aggregate body of fathers may alienate the labor of all their sons, of their posterity, in the aggregate, and oblige them to pay for all the enterprises, just or unjust, profitable or ruinous, into which our vices, our passions or our personal interests may lead us. But I trust that this proposition needs only to be looked at by an American to be seen in its true point of view, and that we shall all consider ourselves unauthorized to saddle posterity with our debts, and morally bound to pay them ourselves; and consequently within what may be deemed the period of a generation, or the life of the majority." --Thomas Jefferson to John Wayles Eppes, 1813. ME 13:357

"It is incumbent on every generation to pay its own debts as it goes. A principle which if acted on would save one-half the wars of the world." --Thomas Jefferson to A. L. C. Destutt de Tracy, 1820. FE 10:175

Freeing the Nation from Debt

"To preserve [the] independence [of the people.] we must not let our rulers load us with perpetual debt. We must make our election between *economy and liberty*, or *profusion and servitude*. If we run into such debts as that we must be taxed in our meat and in our drink, in our necessaries and our comforts, in our labors and our amusements, for our callings and our creeds, as the people of England are, our people, like them, must come to labor sixteen hours in the twenty-four, give the earnings of fifteen of these to the government for their debts and daily expenses, and the sixteenth being insufficient to afford us bread, we must live, as they now do, on oatmeal and potatoes, have no time to think, no means of calling the mismanagers to account, but be glad to obtain subsistence by hiring ourselves to rivet their chains on the necks of our fellow-sufferers." --Thomas Jefferson to Samuel Kercheval, 1816. ME 15:39

"No earthly consideration could induce my consent to contract such a debt as England has by her wars for commerce, to reduce our citizens by taxes to such wretchedness, as that laboring sixteen of the twenty-four hours, they are still unable to afford themselves bread, or barely to earn as much oatmeal or potatoes as will keep soul and body together. And all this to feed the avidity of a few millionary merchants and to keep up one thousand ships of war for the protection of their commercial speculations." --Thomas Jefferson to William H. Crawford, 1816. ME 15:29

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