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## Thomas Jefferson Articulates the Agrarian Ideology

1781

Excerpted from *Notes on the State of Virginia*

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*Thomas Jefferson's only book, Notes on the State of Virginia, was primarily written in 1781 and first published privately in 1784. In the following excerpt titled "Manufactures," Jefferson argued that Americans should build their economy around agriculture rather than manufacturing. Over two decades later, as President, Jefferson took steps to encourage the expansion of the agrarian republic, most notably by purchasing the massive Louisiana Territory in 1803. The War of 1812 led him to recognize the need for some domestic manufacturing, but the ideology articulated below remained influential in American politics for many decades. —D. Voelker*

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{1} We never had an interior trade of any importance. Our exterior commerce has suffered very much from the beginning of the present contest [the American Revolution]. During this time we have manufactured within our families the most necessary articles of clothing. 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 . . . our people will certainly return as soon as they can, to the raising [of] raw materials, and exchanging them for finer manufactures than they are able to execute themselves.

{2} In Europe the lands are either cultivated, or locked up against the cultivator. Manufacture must therefore be resorted to of necessity not of choice, to support the surplus of their people. But we have an immensity of land courting the industry of the husbandman. 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?

{3} Those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever he had a chosen people, whose breasts he has made his peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue. It is the focus in which he keeps alive that sacred fire, which otherwise might escape from the face of the earth. Corruption of morals in the mass of cultivators is a phenomenon 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, depend for it on the casualties and caprice of customers. Dependence begets subservience and venality, suffocates the germ of virtue, and prepares fit tools for the designs of ambition. . . .

{4} While we have land to labor then, let us never wish to see our citizens occupied at a work-bench, or twirling a distaff. 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 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 vigor. A degeneracy in these is a canker which soon eats to the heart of its laws and constitution.

(continued)

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**Discussion Questions:**

1. Why did Jefferson call farmers “the chosen people of God”?
2. Why did Jefferson believe that industrialization would threaten liberty and virtue?
3. How did Jefferson’s agrarian ideology draw on the republican ideology (see p. 7)?
4. What sorts of problems might have resulted from the pursuit of an agrarian United States?

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SOURCE: The base text for this electronic document is the edition of *Notes on the State of Virginia* from the Avalon Project at Yale Law School at <http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/jevifram.htm>. Paragraph divisions and numbers have been added. Spellings have been modernized.



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