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Following his other well-received works on Thomas Jefferson, Francis D. Cogliano’s latest contribution, Emperor of Liberty, makes a strong addition to the literature on one of America’s most thought-provoking figures. Focusing on Jefferson’s foreign policy, Cogliano’s study is the first to look at this topic since Robert W. Tucker and David C. Hendrickson’s 1990 Empire of Liberty. But, as is indicated by the title twist, Cogliano’s work takes a different stance from Tucker and Hendrickson’s.1 Whereas Empire of Liberty examined Jefferson during his presidency, Emperor of Liberty takes a longer view. Cogliano investigates the chronological evolution of Jefferson’s statecraft—defined as “the use of the power of the state to achieve its ends” (6)—from his time as governor of Virginia (June 1, 1779–June 3, 1781) through his second term as president of the United States (March 4, 1805–March 4, 1809). But Emperor of Liberty is not comprehensive. It is not meant to be. Cogliano offers an “episodic” (7) analysis of Jefferson’s foreign policy, examining through a series of case studies how he sought “to realize his vision of a republican empire” (6). This episodic layout is to the book’s benefit. It enables Cogliano to show how Jefferson learned from experience.

More importantly, though, Cogliano’s case studies allow him to interrogate the main historiographical dichotomy associated with analyses of twentieth-century American foreign policy: “idealis[t] and realis[t]” (7). Taking a different view, Cogliano confronts Jefferson’s idealist and realist proponents, arguing that “the realist/idealist dichotomy isn’t all that helpful” (9). Instead, Cogliano argues, “although Jefferson was guided by a clear ideological vision for the American republic, he was pragmatic about the means he employed to protect the republic and advance its strategic interests” (10). In other words, Jefferson was an idealist and a realist, a rare blend of both, and emphasized one approach or the other at varying stages of his political career.


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Cogliano articulates this argument in seven well-written and deeply researched chapters. His main sources are, of course, Jefferson’s writings, but he also employs the writings of James Madison, George Mason, and George Washington, among others. Cogliano does not rely solely on published versions, though, examining a rich blend of published and unpublished materials. His understanding of and engagement with relevant Jeffersonian literature is just as impressive. There are regular references to other historians’ views throughout.

With a strong source foundation, then, Cogliano’s narrative gathers momentum in the book’s early stages. In the opening three chapters, he covers what could be described as testing periods in Jefferson’s long political career: his tenure as governor of Virginia amid British invasion; his unsuccessful diplomatic endeavors to launch a military campaign against the Barbary States of North Africa—Algiers, Morocco, Tripoli, and Tunis—to free twenty-two captured Americans; the Nootka Sound Crisis; his estrangement from Alexander Hamilton; and, amid debates over U.S. participation in the French Revolution, his bombastic confrontations with Citizen Genet. In the latter half of *Emperor of Liberty*, Cogliano’s argument for Jefferson’s balanced realist/idealist diplomacy resonates throughout his coverage of the Jay Treaty, Citizen Adet, and the X Y Z Affair; the Tripolitan War (1801–5); the Louisiana Purchase; and the Embargo Act of 1807.

Cogliano’s Jefferson is a man who gained invaluable experience during the various crises he endured. As governor, Jefferson’s executive power was constrained by a Virginia constitution that stipulated he could only act with the explicit support of an eight-man Council of State. Without its support, Jefferson’s options were limited. He could not call out the militia. He could not make official appointments. He could not grant pardons. Power in revolutionary Virginia was “decentralized,” Cogliano writes, making it difficult for Jefferson to react effectively “when the state was beset by repeated British invasions in 1780 and 1781” (15). Instead, he fled from Monticello, prompting allegations of cowardice and a politically damaging inquiry into his actions in June 1781. The lessons Jefferson took from his experience as governor played an important role in defining his statecraft. He felt he did not have enough power, and governing a state without the necessary executive power threatened the safety of the republic; it had endangered Virginia’s, if not the country’s, independence. From then on, Cogliano argues, Jefferson was committed to the notion that “an executive must act decisively in crisis” (34). And even if the executive had to exceed constitutional limits, that was acceptable, but retrospective approval must be sought and obtained. This was not Jefferson the idealist; this was Jefferson the realist, the pragmatic politician who was willing to overextend executive power to protect his country.

In later chapters, Cogliano continues to show how important Jefferson’s governorship was to the development of his statecraft. In a
chapter titled “Chastise Their Insolence,” for instance, which covers the First Tripolitan War—a period “largely neglected” (170) by Jeffersonian scholars—Cogliano shows how Jefferson sought retrospective approval from members of Congress for taking the United States to war without consulting them. “As Jefferson interpreted the Constitution,” Cogliano writes, “he had the authority—and the duty—to take action to defend the United States” (156–57).

Cogliano expertly shows that Jefferson recognized the relative weakness of the United States on the global stage. For Jefferson, protecting the United States and its political sovereignty in light of that vulnerability was a defining aspect of his foreign policy. Indeed, in addition to examining heretofore-overlooked aspects of Jefferson’s public career—in particular, the two chapters on the Barbary States—an ever-present theme of *Emperor of Liberty* is how Jefferson’s foreign policy was shaped by his desire to shelter and guide the new nation. He knew that the United States was not a global power. Great Britain and France far exceeded what America was in the latter decades of the eighteenth century. Jefferson had to do what was necessary to ensure the republic’s protection.

Equally important, Jefferson recognized that diplomatic threats came in various shapes and sizes. He handled crises differently, depending on what they entailed. Yet whether he was responding to the capture of twenty-two Americans by Algerian pirates in July 1785 or responding to Genet’s disbelief in American neutrality in the early 1790s, the goal of Jefferson’s international statecraft was consistent. He did what was necessary to protect the republic. If there was a threat, Jefferson was willing to move to defend against it, using force if necessary.

But Jefferson’s actions were not only grounded in his desire to protect the fledgling United States. As president, according to Cogliano, he wanted to build “an expansionist American republic” (5). The enlargement of the United States was central to guaranteeing its commercial, political, and territorial sovereignty. “In Jefferson’s mind,” writes Cogliano, “the growth of the ‘empire of liberty’ and the success of the American republic were one and the same thing” (5). The only way to counter the country’s “inevitable decline” (183), Jefferson believed, was through Americans’ access to overseas markets and westward expansion. Through commerce and expansion, Jefferson’s vision for an American empire cultivated by yeomen farmers could be realized. Even the infamous 1807 embargo, which, Cogliano asserts, “had catastrophic results for the United States” (207), was put in place to protect the republic. With few options open to Jefferson, economic coercion was the safest choice. More importantly, though, Cogliano argues, Jefferson’s willingness to act decisively in a moment of need illustrates the consistency of his statecraft.

Throughout *Emperor of Liberty*, Cogliano shows just how pragmatic Jefferson could be. But he does not go so far as to push Jefferson completely
into the “realist” camp, arguing that the nation’s third president was often inspired to act by his ideological interpretation of situations. Take, for example, Cogliano’s treatment of the Louisiana Purchase. The acquisition of Louisiana, Jefferson knew, would guarantee access to the Mississippi River and enable westward expansion so his nation of farmers could grow, ensuring its future liberty and sovereignty. But Jefferson was not confident that buying territory was constitutional. After drafting an amendment in mid-1803, he dropped it. It was clear that legislative delays could, and probably would, bring the deal to a grinding halt, putting Jefferson’s idealist vision of America in jeopardy. However, the Senate embraced the Louisiana Treaty and it was ratified in October 1803. A week later, the House of Representatives passed legislation that gave Jefferson control of Louisiana. By the end of the year, Jefferson was exhibiting his signature blend of idealism and realism. To protect America’s investment and its short- and long-term future, Jefferson the realist authorized American troops to attack Spanish forces should they prevent the transfer of Louisiana to the United States.

*Emperor of Liberty* is a significant piece of scholarship. It is also beautifully written. Cogliano’s deft examination of Jefferson’s career shows how historians’ understanding of the third president as either an idealist or a realist overlooks much of his statecraft. By looking at Jefferson’s political career from the 1770s until the early 1800s, Cogliano skillfully shows how Jefferson was pragmatic in order to achieve his idealist ends. This forces us to ask new questions about the foreign policy and statecraft of Jefferson’s contemporaries.