

The conversation of thomas jefferson essay

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The Conversation of Thomas Jefferson Thomas Jefferson was perhaps one of the most prolific letter-writers of the century. In a literal way, Jefferson started a conversation with every important man in his time, offering advice, opinions, and objections to the way politics and democracy were fundamentally maintained and run. With that said, a look will be taken into two letters that Thomas Jefferson wrote, one to the President of the United States, James Madison, on March 8, 1811, and one to General James Wilkinson on March 10, 1811 to highlight the boundless conversation abilities of Jefferson. To begin with, Jefferson addresses President James Madison with a respectful, yet informal air.

He writes that he has received two letters, which he has enclosed for the President's perusal, that, because of their subject matter, require the President's attention. Immediately then, he launches into an analysis of the President's campaign, citing his theories for the future of England and the breakdown of the royalty, including Napoleon Bonaparte, citing that he isn't sure, yet, of Bonaparte's role and that he is "much afraid the Percival ministry may have given orders for taking possession of [East Florida] before they were put out of power" (Jefferson, 22). From this statement, he moves into a weather and crop report, citing a "wretched winter" (Jefferson, 22) in which they "had seven snows" (23). Jefferson's account at this point is exceptionally informal, as if he were writing this letter to a family member or close personal friend, and not the next president of the United States. Further, Jefferson ends the letter with an incredibly informal, "ever affectionately yours" (23). Jefferson's informal attitude to his successor would be a bit inappropriate, except it seems that President Madison was

indeed a “ political protégé” (Library of Congress) of Jefferson, following in his presidency where Jefferson himself left off.

Jefferson’s informal affection, then, adds to the conversation, bringing old president close to new president, exemplifying the relationship that the two must have shared to create such a comfortable dialogue. Then, just two days after his letter to President Madison, Jefferson penned a letter to General James Wilkinson because he has received the memoir that General Wilkinson has written. Jefferson’s letter, in this case, shows a bit of the same informality, which demonstrates, yet again, the relationships that Jefferson holds with two very powerful people in the United States. In regards to a bit of scandal about himself, he responds to General Wilkinson that “ the expression respecting myself, stated in your letter to have been imputed to you by your calumniators, had either never been heard by me, or, if heard, had been unheeded and forgotten. I have been too much the butt of such falsehoods myself to do others the injustice of permitting them to make the least impression on me” (Jefferson, 23). Without General Wilkinson’s letter to Jefferson, some of Jefferson’s meaning, here, is a bit obscure, until a bit later he mentions a book by Daniel Clark, who he has never heard of, that he refuses to read, even going so far as to say that he is “ even leaving off the newspapers, desirous to disengage myself from the contentions of the world, and consign to entire tranquility and to the kinder passions what remains to me of life” (23). Daniel Clark, it seems, has had years of correspondence with Thomas Jefferson, since at least 1799, in which the two debated back and forth about the Spanish, about politics, about the creation of the United States as a power center for the world, and much more. However, Clark was

later responsible for attempting to discredit both Jefferson and General Wilkinson, going so far as to cite General Wilkinson as a traitor—even taking his accusations to congress—who had been working with the Spanish to bring down the United States (Welch).

Clark was never indicted for his accusations, and though General Wilkinson suffers quite a blow, Jefferson and most of the newspapers stand by him until the charges are removed. By 1811, Clark has been discredited for his accusations and leaves a will before taking leave to Philadelphia and dying a short time later from “ an unknown malady” (Welch). While his death may have been from unknown causes, it does not seem to have caused much of a stir—indeed, not as much as his writings caused for General Wilkinson and Thomas Jefferson. At one point, Jefferson writes that “ my consciousness that no man on earth has me under his thumb is evidence enough that you never used the expression” (Jefferson, 23).

In this, Jefferson is letting General Wilkinson know that he has full confidence in his friend, and, even with the accusations, Jefferson knows that they are only rumors. More, Jefferson is a firm believer in the ideal that a person cannot be made out to be an evil or bad person, without their own consent. And, in this situation, Jefferson is firmly refusing to offer that consent to Daniel Clark, leaving the accusation just that—an empty accusation that deserves no credence other than that Clark should watch his step. At the close of the letter, Jefferson writes that he knows the situation will, indeed, blow over, citing that “ my belief is that it will, and I found that belief on my own knowledge of Burr’s transactions, on my view of your conduct in encountering them, and on the candor of your judges” (Jefferson, 24). In <https://assignbuster.com/the-conversation-of-thomas-jefferson-essay/>

this, Jefferson is firmly stating that he believes General Wilkinson to be innocent, knowing him true of character and heart, and letting him know, in this instance, that he has a friend backing him.

Jefferson's emotion for his friend is clear as this letter relates his feelings toward the situation involving General Wilkinson, Daniel Clark, and himself. When he ends the letter, Jefferson closes with an informal " I salute you with my best wishes and entire respect" (23) to signify to his friend that he will remain steady despite the rumors swirling around about his character. Jefferson, for his part, seems to take no credence in the rumors, having not even read the newspapers lately, and taking full confidence in his friend, despite the traitorous accusations. At the time of these letters, Jefferson had already done much to " influence the development of the federal government through his correspondence," (Library of Congress) even " shaping the look of the nation's capital and defining the powers of the Constitution and the nature of the emerging republic" (Library of Congress). Jefferson, as the third president of the United States, had a great deal of authority and power in the shaping of the new world, which continued even after he left the office. His writings are a direct reflection of this, demonstrating Jefferson's need to be involved, yet, also, highlighting his profound effect on the emerging nation, almost by quill and letter alone. The conversation began in 1789 when Thomas Jefferson wrote a letter to James Madison, nearly twenty years before James Madison was to become president, that has since become his most popular and quoted letter of all time.

In it, Jefferson writes that “‘ the earth belongs in usufruct to the living,’ it was a ‘ self-evident’ principle ‘ that the dead have neither powers nor rights over it.’ Since ‘ by the law of nature, one generation is to another as one independent nation is to another,’ parents have no moral authority to impose decisions upon children who had no part in making them. The same rule, he contended, should apply to governments” (McDonald). This letter began what became Thomas Jefferson’s transcendent conversation with the powerful men running the United States.

And, in this pronouncement to James Madison, Jefferson is alluding to something much greater, a world in which life is just and men are to rise up and live it as they wish. Jefferson’s words, especially in this letter, strongly show his passion for his fellow man, and that passion continued in every conversation that he had since. Overall, Thomas Jefferson was an incredibly prolific writer who had a profound impact on the conversation of the late 1700’s and early 1800’s until his death. From the beginning, Jefferson aligned himself with powerful men, most of who would either run the United States, or be charged with defending it in times of war. Jefferson did much to inspire his correspondents, offering praise, opinions, and most importantly, loyalty and friendship. Works Cited. Jefferson, Thomas. The Writings of Thomas Jefferson, Vol 13.

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