



## Two Excerpts from a Letter Written by a Gentleman in Our Government to a "Recent" Graduate of the College of William and Mary in Virginia

I am among those who think well of the human character generally. I consider man as formed for society, and endowed by nature with those dispositions which fit him for society. I believe also, with Condorcet, as mentioned in your letter, that his [man's] mind is perfectible to a degree of which we cannot as yet form any conception. It is impossible for a man who takes a survey of what is already known, not to see what an immensity in every branch of science yet remains to be discovered, and that too of articles to which our faculties seem adequate.

I join you therefore in branding as cowardly the idea that the human mind is incapable of further advances. This is precisely the doctrine which the present despots of the earth are inculcating, and their friends here re-echoing; and applying especially to religion and politics; that it is not probable that any thing better will be discovered than what was known to our fathers. We are to look backwards then and not forwards for the improvement of science, and to find it amidst feudal barbarisms and the fires of Spitalfields. But thank heaven the American mind is already too much opened, to list to these impostures; and while the art of printing is left to us, science can never be retrograde; what is once acquired of real knowledge can never be lost. To preserve the freedom of the

human mind then and freedom of the press, every spirit should be ready to devote itself to martyrdom; for as long as we may think as we will, and speak as we think, the condition of man will proceed in improvement. The generation which is going off the stage has deserved well of mankind for the struggles it has made, and for having arrested that course of despotism which had overwhelmed the world for thousands and thousands of years. If there seems to be danger that the ground they have gained will be lost again, that danger comes from the generation your contemporary. But that the enthusiasm which characterises youth should lift its parricide hands against freedom and science would be such a monstrous phaenomenon as I cannot place among possible things in this age and this country. Your college at least has shewn itself incapable of it; and if the youth of any other place have seemed to rally under other banners it has been from delusions which they will soon dissipate. I shall be happy to hear from you from time to time, and of your progress in study, and to be useful to you in whatever is in my power; being with sincere esteem  
 Dear Sir Your friend & servt.

TH: JEFFERSON

*Monticello*  
*June 18, 1799*

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