

-
- [BOOKSHELF](#)

Redcoats Coming, Nobody Home

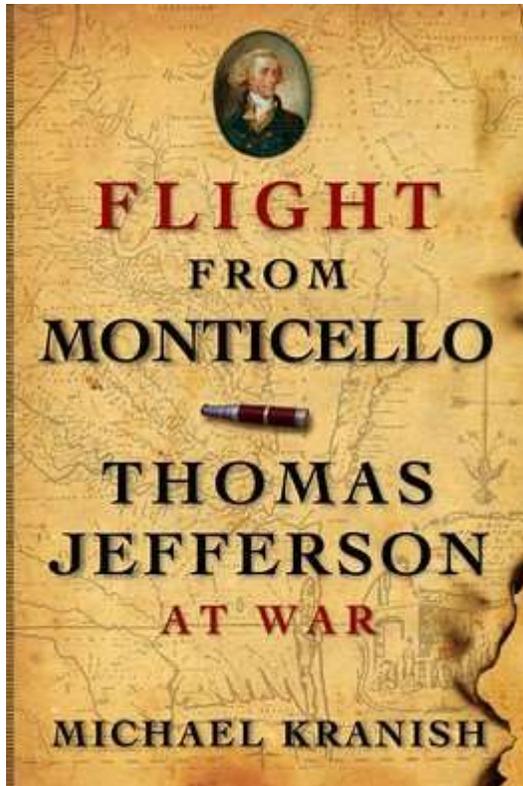
Thomas Jefferson's wartime 'dark period' was marked by inglorious retreats

By Robert K. Landers

Updated Jan. 29, 2010 12:01 a.m. ET

The war must have seemed very far away from Monticello on those evenings in 1779 when Thomas Jefferson joined a Hessian prisoner of war in a violin duet, with Martha Jefferson accompanying them on the pianoforte, while Baroness Riedesel, the regal wife of the captive Hessian commander, led the party in dances. Jefferson that January had welcomed the arrival in the Charlottesville, Va., area of nearly 4,000 British and Hessian prisoners taken in the Battle of Saratoga, believing they would provide a boost to the local economy.

He also believed that the prisoners should be treated humanely and, at least in the case of the officers, more than humanely. "It is for the benefit of mankind to mitigate the horrors of war as much as possible," he argued. He saw to it that British and Hessian officers were ensconced in mansions, arranging for Brig. Gen. William Phillips, the leader of the British prisoners, to rent an estate called Blenheim, complete with black slaves to attend to his needs.



"The great cause which divides our countries is not to be decided by individual animosities," Jefferson told the general, who soon invited him to dine at Blenheim. Two years later, in 1781, having been released in a prisoner exchange and with his knowledge of Virginia much improved, Jefferson's new British friend "would command an invasion that targeted Virginia and Jefferson himself," Michael Kranish notes in "Flight From Monticello," his superb narrative of the high-minded Virginian's turbulent wartime years.

When the Revolutionary War commenced, Jefferson had been enthusiastic. While in Philadelphia in June 1775 for a meeting of the Continental Congress, and having just learned of the Battle of Bunker Hill, he was asked to draft a declaration on the necessity of taking up arms. "The war is now heartily entered into," he wrote to his brother-in-law, and he expected it to last but a few months. He told a cousin that he looked forward to spending "the rest of my days in domestic ease and tranquility."

That was not to be, of course. Jefferson's soaring words in the Declaration of Independence in 1776 were the first of his accomplishments that would eventually turn

him into a demigod, but—as Mr. Kranish, a Washington reporter for the Boston Globe, relates in compelling detail—his two terms as Virginia's wartime governor, from June 1779 to June 1781, ended with his reputation under a cloud. The Virginia House of Delegates—angry that, by insisting on exiting from office when his second term expired, Jefferson had left the state without an executive in a perilous hour—voted for a formal inquiry into what his critics deemed his feckless conduct during the previous 12 months. "This event marked the nadir of the entire public career of Thomas Jefferson," Dumas Malone wrote in "Jefferson the Virginian" (1948), the first volume of his monumental six-volume biography.

Jefferson's years as governor, Mr. Kranish shows, constituted "a dark period of his life"—and haunted him until his dying days. Mr. Kranish is fair-minded. He does not seek to indict Jefferson as a coward (as some of his foes later did) or caricature him as a woolly intellectual or make the "dark period" stand for the whole life. Rather, the author tries to portray the man and his ineffectual wartime governorship as they were, with all their contradictions.

Flight was nothing new to Jefferson when, no longer governor, he raced away from Monticello in June 1781 just minutes before British soldiers showed up. As governor, he had fled Richmond the preceding January in the face of an invasion led by the traitorous Brig. Gen. Benedict Arnold. Receiving word early on New Year's Day of a fleet approaching the Virginia coast, Jefferson had been unsure whether it was British invaders or French reinforcements. Instead of assuming the worst and calling up the militia, he decided to wait for more definite intelligence. The resulting two-day delay made it impossible to prevent Arnold from capturing Richmond.

FLIGHT FROM MONTICELLO

By Michael Kranish
Oxford, 388 pages, \$27.95



A 19th-century depiction of Monticello, Thomas Jefferson's home near Charlottesville, Va. GRANGER COLLECTION

Jefferson—who later pointed out that he had no military skill or experience—never accepted any blame for that outcome, but even the admiring Dumas Malone thought he should have accepted some. The legislative inquiry into his conduct as governor never came off, however. After Lord Cornwallis's surrender at Yorktown in October 1781, with America's war for independence all but concluded, there was no great urge to besmirch the reputation of the author of the Declaration of Independence.

Many recognized at the time that the revolutionaries' lofty sentiments were mocked by their ownership of slaves. "How is it," Samuel Johnson asked in 1775, "that we hear the loudest yelps for liberty among the drivers of Negroes?" Even so, Dumas Malone sneered at the emancipation proclamation issued in November 1775 by Virginia's last royal governor, which freed rebels' slaves willing to fight alongside the British. The proclamation "was not destined to rank with Lincoln's," Malone said, asserting that while the move "attracted some runaway slaves . . . [it] served chiefly to infuriate the Virginians and to drive them along the road to independence." But Mr. Kranish rightly gives attention not only to the hundreds of slaves who enlisted in Britain's "Ethiopian Regiment" and the thousands given hope by the proclamation, but also to subsequent British efforts at emancipation during the war. Jefferson himself estimated (or vastly overestimated, according to some historians) that 30,000 slaves fled their masters in Virginia. "Whatever the total number of slaves freed by the British," Mr. Kranish says, "many thousands who fled eventually made it to freedom, while others who were briefly free were returned to their masters at the end of the war."

Few slaves in Virginia, perhaps only 100, served in the military on the Revolutionary side, most as substitutes for their masters. In 1780, while a Virginia delegate in the Continental Congress, Jefferson's close friend James Madison learned of a Virginia bill to offer slaves to whites as an inducement to join the Continental Army. "Would it not be as well to liberate and make soldiers at once of the blacks themselves as to make them instruments for enlisting white Soldiers?" Madison asked, adding: "It would certainly be more consonant to the principles of liberty which ought never be lost sight of in a contest for liberty."

Alas, Madison's proposal was rejected. A militia commander's later attempt to revive the idea, in May 1781, "with thousands of British soldiers roaming the state and Jefferson facing a woeful shortage of Virginians turning out in defense," also got nowhere, Mr. Kranish says. Slaveholders like Jefferson "had no interest in letting go of valuable slaves whom they had trained for a lifetime of forced labor on their plantations." And so was lost, Mr. Kranish notes, a great opportunity for revolutionary Virginia to begin moving the South closer to the promise of Jefferson's Declaration.

—*Mr. Landers is the author of "An Honest Writer: The Life and Times of James T. Farrell."*