

Nov 04, 2016 by [Nicholas J. Cull](#)

Jefferson on Soft Power: Behind Obama's Cairo Quote ^[1]

Like many great orators President Obama knows how to quote scripture to maximum impact. His Cairo speech included passages from the Holy Koran, which his audience applauded. His conclusion also mustered words from the Talmud and a final quote from Christ's Sermon on the Mount – "Blessed are the Peacemakers, for they shall be called the Children of God" which received no less applause. But some of his scriptures are those of America's Civic Religion, as with his allusion to Tom Paine's first issue of *The Crisis* in his inaugural address: "Let it be told to the future world...that in the depth of winter, when nothing but hope and virtue could survive... that the city and the country, alarmed at one common danger, came forth to meet [it]." The Cairo speech also included a quote from a hero of America's past: Thomas Jefferson. It went like this:

Although I believe that the Iraqi people are ultimately better off without the tyranny of Saddam Hussein, I also believe that events in Iraq have reminded America of the need to use diplomacy and build international consensus to resolve our problems whenever possible. Indeed, we can recall the words of Thomas Jefferson, who said: "*I hope that our wisdom will grow with our power, and teach us, that the less we use our power the greater it will be.*"

Jefferson had already been introduced in the speech as the 'founding father' who kept a Koran in his library, the volume upon which Muslim-American Congressman Keith Ellison (D-MN) took his oath of office. The quote gave the weight of history to Obama's profession of the now familiar 'smart power' approach. It all made for one more effective moment in a remarkable speech.

But the president's deft quotation belies its relative obscurity. He may be able to recall those words, but that quote has not been a part of the discourse around soft power or smart power. Even the father of the term, Joseph Nye, confirmed -- when I asked -- that the quote was new to him. Curious, I set off to track it down. I began with the digitized version of the Thomas Jefferson papers available through that great Jeffersonian institution, the Library of Congress. Was it the inaugural address? The farewell? Thirty second later I had my answer. The quote came from one of the minor epistles of American holy writ: a letter from Jefferson's correspondence with the largely forgotten Scottish-born Pennsylvanian Thomas Leiper (1845-1825), whose distinctions include his building the first American railway. The two men wrote to each other on political issues for thirty four years. Jefferson penned the quoted letter on 12 June 1815.

The context of Jefferson's remark was the astonishing news that Napoleon Bonaparte had escaped from his exile on the island of Elba, landed in France and marched on Paris, raising

a new army as he went. The Bourbon King, Louis XVIII had fled and Napoleon was Emperor once more. In a letter in April 1815, Leiper, ever the Scott, had rather enjoyed the impending discomfort to the tyrannical English government. Replying in June, Jefferson cautioned him that Bonaparte was no friend of America either and: 'Our form of government is odious him...' Rather than endorsing either England or France, Jefferson expressed his hope:

...that all nations may recover and retain their independence; that those which are overgrown may not advance beyond safe measures of power, that a salutary balance may be maintained among nations, and that our peace, commerce and friendship, may be sought and cultivated by all.

Jefferson then, as though catching a glimpse of a world of stealth bombers and multi-billion dollar aircraft carriers, looked to a future of American ascendancy: "Not in our day, but at no distant one, we make shake the rod over the heads of all, which may make the stoutest of them tremble." Then comes the now familiar Cairo quote: "But I hope our wisdom will grow with our power, and teach us, that the less we use our power, the greater it will be."

Eight days after Jefferson wrote those words Napoleon's imperial dream came to a dramatic end at the Battle of Waterloo.

But how did the President come by the quote? Armed with the fact that the sentence in question came from a letter to Leiper, I had a sufficiently unusual name to make immediate progress with a digital search. Nothing showed up on Lexis-Nexis but a Google search for "Leiper soft power" soon gave me a likely source. I found that it had been posted twice in recent years by *Harper's* magazine's on-line edition, first on 27 May 2007 as "Jefferson on Soft Power" and then on 11 March 2008 as "Jefferson on the Utility of Soft Power" -- sufficient to either be clipped by an aide or perhaps even noted or filed away by the president himself, but more likely sufficient to show up in a White House online search. Better to say "we can recall the words of Thomas Jefferson" than "we can Google for a great quote on soft power and find Jefferson saying..."

But quoting a past master can be a risky business. Merely taking Jefferson's views on Napoleon Bonaparte we find, for example his insistence that the United States should respect the right of the French people to be ruled by a dictator. They even had, as he wrote in a letter to George Ticknor on 4 July that year, "the right to be eaten if they chuse [sic] it." [1] The Iraq War suggests that the United States no longer admits such a right. But the real problem is whether President Obama's actions will conform to the Jeffersonian rhetoric. The president may be speaking about wisdom in the use of power, but are his deeds conforming to his words? One logical index is the number of Predator missions over Pakistan. Jefferson's successor is shaking that particular rod rather freely and with an alarming number of civilian casualties. How does he expect having a robot bomb kill one's family plays to the public on the Northwest Frontier? Could there be a mixed message coming from Washington? The Secretaries of State and Defence have both endorsed a Smart Power approach, but what of the National Security Advisor, ex-General Jim Jones? Could it be he who is backing the hard power on the Pakistani borderlands? Perhaps the toughest hearts and minds for Obama to win are not in Cairo but rather closer to hand. The result of that battle will likely determine whether President Obama is remembered as a Jefferson or someone of lesser stature,

perhaps headed for his own Waterloo.

[1] For a wider discussion of Jefferson's attitude to Napoleon see Joseph I. Shulim, "Thomas Jefferson Views Napoleon," *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, Vol. 60, No. 2 (Apr., 1952), pp. 288-304, available via Jstor.
