

LETTER TO DANTON [EXCERPTS]

“May sixth, second year of the Republic” [1793]

CITOYEN DANTON: I am exceedingly disturbed at the distractions, jealousies, discontents and uneasiness that reign among us, and which, if they continue, will bring ruin and disgrace on the Republic. When I left America in the year 1787, it was my intention to return the year following, but the French Revolution, and the prospect it afforded of extending the principles of liberty and fraternity through the greater part of Europe, have induced me to prolong my stay upwards of six years. I now despair of seeing the great object of European liberty accomplished, and my despair arises not from the combined foreign powers, not from the intrigues of aristocracy and priestcraft, but from the tumultuous misconduct with which the internal affairs of the present Revolution are now conducted.

.....But while these internal contentions continue, while the hope remains to the enemy of seeing the Republic fall to pieces, while not only the representatives of the departments but representation itself is publicly insulted, as it has lately been and now is by the people of Paris, or at least by the tribunes, the enemy will be encouraged to hang about the frontiers and await the issuance of circumstances.

.....The danger every day increases of a rupture between Paris and the departments. The departments did not send their deputies to Paris to be insulted, and every insult shown them is an insult to the departments that elected and sent them. I see but one effectual plan to prevent the rupture taking place, and that is to fix the residence of the Convention, and of future assemblies, at a distance from Paris.

.....As soon as a constitution shall be established I shall return to America; and be the future prosperity of France ever so great, I shall enjoy no other part of it than the happiness of knowing it. In the meantime I am distressed to see matters so badly conducted, and so little attention paid to moral principles.....

There ought to be some regulation with respect to the spirit of denunciation that now prevails. If every individual is to indulge his private malignancy or his private ambition, to denounce at random and without any kind of proof, all confidence will be undermined and all authority be destroyed. Calumny is a species of treachery that ought to be punished as well as any other kind of treachery. It is a private vice productive of public evils; because it is possible to irritate men into disaffection by continual calumny who never intended to be disaffected.

It is therefore equally as necessary to guard against the evils of unfounded or malignant suspicion as against the evils of blind confidence. It is equally as necessary to protect the characters of public officers from calumny as it is to punish them for treachery or misconduct.....

Calumny becomes harmless and defeats itself when it attempts to act upon too large a scale. Thus the denunciations of the sections [of Paris] against the twenty-two deputies [Girondists] falls to the ground. The departments that elected them are better judges of their moral and political characters than those who have denounced them. This denunciation will injure Paris in the opinion of the departments because it has the appearance of dictating to them what sort of deputies they shall elect. Most of the acquaintances that I have in the Convention are among those that are in that list, and I know there are not better men nor better patriots than what they are.

I have written a letter to Marat of the same date as this but not on the same subject. He may show it to you if he choose.

Votre Ami,
THOMAS PAINE.

Only a few months afterwards Paine and, somewhat later, Danton were denounced and sent to Luxembourg Prison. Through luck only, Paine would escape the guillotine. Danton was not so lucky.

In: *The Life and Works of Thomas Paine*, ed. Wm. Van der Weyde, I, 304, New Rochelle NY: Thomas Paine National Historical Association

---Selection by Martha Spiegelman