

**Thomas Jefferson to James Madison, March 21,
1798, from The Works of Thomas Jefferson in Twelve
Volumes. Federal Edition. Collected and Edited by Paul
Leicester Ford.**

TO JAMES MADISON MAD. MSS.

Philadelphia, Mar 21, 98.

I wrote you last on the 15th; since that, yours of the 12th is received. Since that, too, a great change has taken place in the appearance of our political atmosphere. The merchants, as before, continue, a respectable part of them, to wish to avoid arming. The French decree operated on them as a sedative, producing more alarm than resentment; on the Representatives, differently. It excited indignation highly in the war party, tho' I do not know that it had added any new friends to that side of the question. We still hoped a majority of about 4.; but the insane message which you will see in the public papers has had great effect. Exultation on the one side, & a certainty of victory; while the other is petrified with astonishment. Our Evans, tho' his soul is wrapt up in the sentiments of this message, yet afraid to give a vote openly for it, is going off to-morrow, as is said. Those who count, say there are still 2. members of the other side who will come over to that of peace. If so, the numbers will be for war measures, 52., against them 53.; if all are present except Evans. The question is, what is to be attempted, supposing we have a majority? I suggest two things: 1. As the President declares he has withdrawn the Executive prohibition to arm, that Congress should pass a Legislative one. If that should fail in the Senate, it would heap coals of fire on their head. 2. As to do nothing & to gain time is everything with us, I propose that they shall come to a resolution of adjournment, "in order to go home & consult their constituents on the great crisis of American affairs now

Library of Congress

existing." Besides gaining time enough by this, to allow the descent on England to have it's effect here as well as there, it will be a means of exciting the whole body of the people from the state of inattention in which they are; it will require every member to call for the sense of his district by petition or instruction; it will shew the people with which side of the House their safety as well as their rights rest, by shewing them which is for war & which for peace; & their representatives will return here invigorated by the avowed support of the American people. I do not know,

however, whether this will be approved, as there has been little consultation on the subject. We see a new instance of the inefficiency of Constitutional guards. We had relied with great security on that provision, which requires two-thirds of the Legislature to declare war. But this is completely eluded by a majority's taking such measures as will be sure to produce war. I wrote you in my last, that an attempt was to be made on that day in Senate, to declare an inexpediency to renew our treaties. But the measure is put off under a hope of it's being attempted under better auspices. To return to the subject of war, it is quite impossible, when we consider all it's existing circumstances, to find any reason in it's favor resulting from views either of interest or honor, & plausible enough to impose even on the weakest mind; and especially, when it would be undertaken by a majority of one or two only. Whatever then be our stock of charity or liberality, we must resort to other views. And those so well known to have been entertained at Annapolis, & afterwards at the grand convention, by a particular set of men, present themselves as those alone which can account for so extraordinary a degree of impetuosity. Perhaps, instead of what was then in contemplation, a separation of the union, which has been so much the topic to the Eastward of late, may be the thing aimed at. I have written so far, two days before the departure of the post. Should anything more occur to-day or to-morrow, it shall be added.

22d. At night. Nothing more.