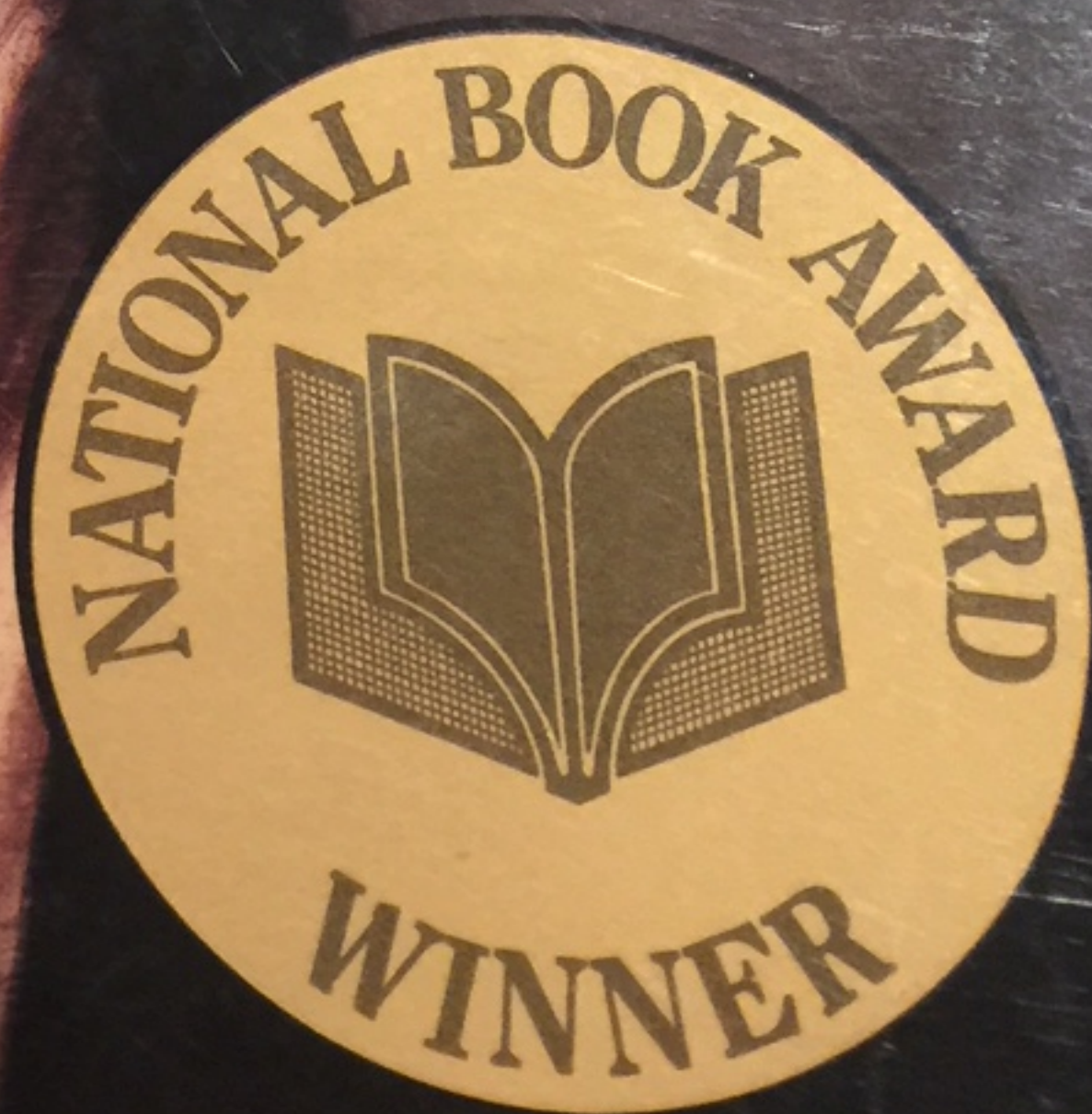
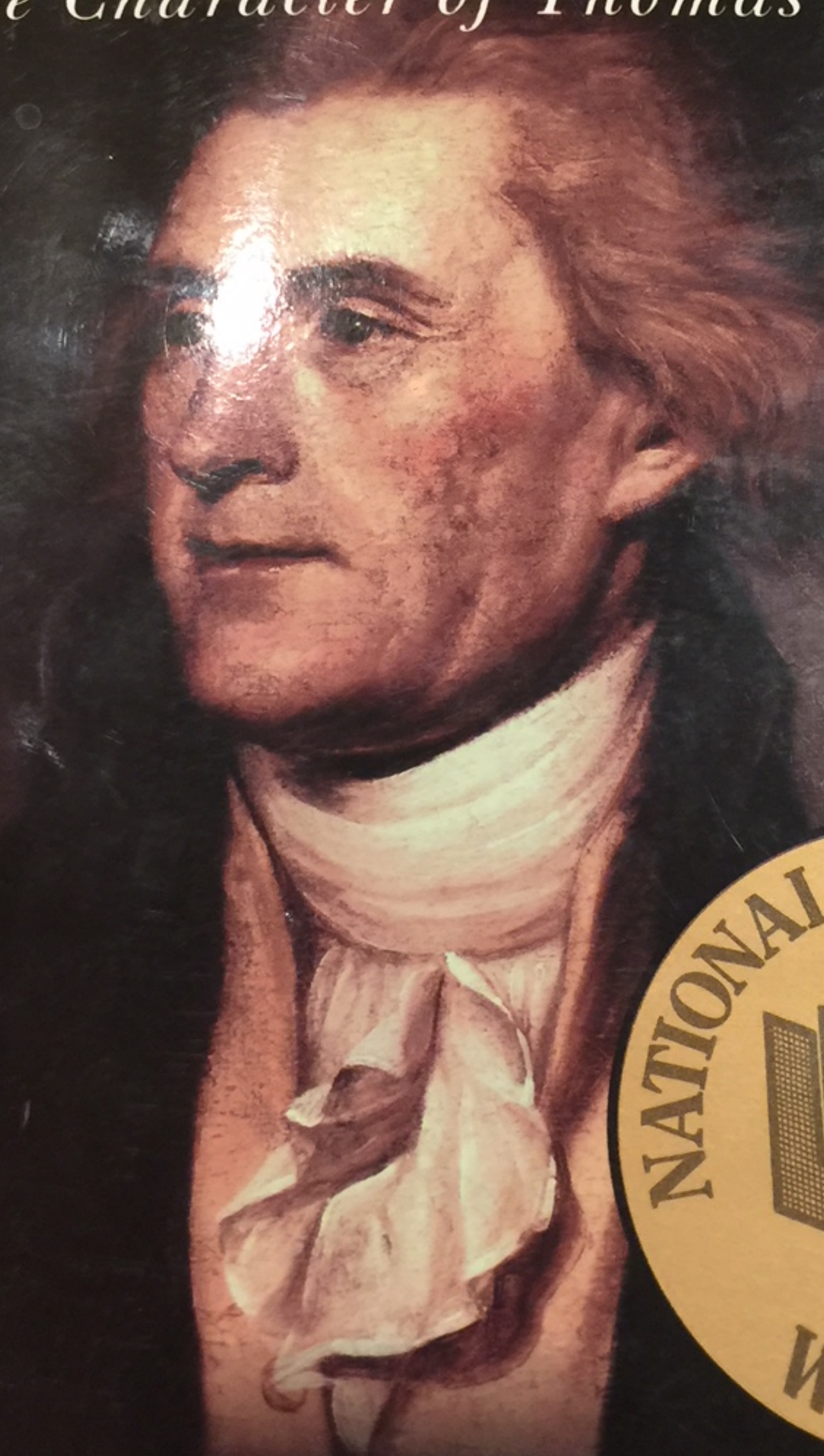


"Fascinating . . . an erudite and illuminating study." — *The New York Times*

AMERICAN SPHINX

The Character of Thomas Jefferson



J O S E P H J . E L L I S

proposal being circulated in Virginia by John Taylor and Edmund Pendleton that called for a one-term presidency with reduced executive power, shorter terms for senators, federal judges removable by a vote of Congress and constitutional limits on the borrowing power of the federal government. Whether one characterized these hints as "shrinking" or "dismantling," they lent credibility to the Federalist rumors that Jefferson meant to destroy the current foundation of the central government and thereby allow the United States to become, like Europe, a series of separate nation-states in the manner of France, Italy and Austria.¹⁸

If there was a consensus within both Republican and Federalist circles that Jefferson's election meant a radical reduction in the powers of the federal government, the only question being how much and the only political disagreement being that the Republicans were overjoyed and the Federalists were terrified, the one dissenting voice belonged to none other than Alexander Hamilton. Acknowledging that "it is too late for me to become his apologist" and that he "did not really have any disposition to do it" anyway, Hamilton went on to offer a backhanded defense of Jefferson's political principles: "I admit that his politics are tinctured with fanaticism, that he is too much in earnest in his democracy, that he has been a mischievous enemy to the principal measures of the past administration, that he is crafty and persevering in his objects, that he is not scrupulous about the means of success, nor very mindful of truth, and that he is a contemptible hypocrite." But despite all these personal weaknesses, indeed in part because of them, Hamilton predicted that Jefferson "is as likely as any man I know to temporize . . . ; and the probable result of such a temper is the preservation of systems, though originally opposed, which being once established, could not be overturned without danger to the person who did it." Like everyone else, Hamilton conceded, he was only guessing, but he did not believe that Jefferson had the disposition to sustain the kind of pressure required to dismantle the federal government. "To my mind," Hamilton concluded, "a true estimate of Mr. J's character warrants the expectation of a temporizing rather than a violent system."¹⁹

These, then, were the personal or private vibrations as well as the