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Thomas Jefferson: Hero or Hypocrite?



The third president of the United States proved himself a brilliant philosopher, a masterful politician and a deeply conflicted citizen. The legacy of Thomas Jefferson remains questionable today.

by Matt Alderton

On July 4, 1776, Thomas Jefferson started a fire with the tip of his pen. As the author of the Declaration of Independence, he wrote those immortal lines in American history, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal ..."

He said it. And he meant it. Whether he lived it, however, is the searing subject of a very heated debate that continues to this day.

A Slight Bent

More than six feet tall, Jefferson was a lanky man, entirely straight-bodied except for a small crick in his neck. He was at once admirably regal and uncommonly awkward. Frances Few, the niece of Jefferson's Secretary of the Treasury, Albert Gallatin, wrote in her diary that Jefferson "stoops very much but holds his head high."

As he was in body—upright with, perhaps, a slight bent—many historians suggest he was the same in mind. "He's so elusive," says Dr. Joshua Rothman, assistant professor of history at the University of Alabama and author of "Notorious in the Neighborhood: Sex and Families Across the Color Line in Virginia, 1787-1861."

"Jefferson is one of those guys who really was not very forthcoming about himself, about his emotions, about who he thought he was as a person. So he's very difficult to penetrate."

An advocate of small government run according to a strict interpretation of the Constitution, Jefferson concocted the Louisiana Purchase, which lacked constitutional precedent and doubled the nation's size. Despite being concerned with fiscal responsibility, he lived most of his life in tremendous debt.

"There are certain things about Jefferson that you can admire," says R.B. Bernstein, adjunct professor of law at New York Law School and author of "Thomas Jefferson," "and then there are certain things that you can find deeply, deeply, deeply troubling."

The Ultimate Contradiction

Jefferson was a Renaissance man. He was not only the author of the Declaration of Independence, but of some 20,000 letters and essays. He was the country's first secretary of state, governor of Virginia, vice president, a two-term president and the founder of the University of Virginia, not to mention an avid historian, philosopher, architect and gardener.

And, he was a slaveholder.

"You have the ultimate contradiction," Bernstein says. "The draftsman of the Declaration of Independence, who wrote 'all men are created equal,' was also a slaveholder."



Thomas Jefferson was the country's first vice president, a two-term president and founder of the University of Virginia. He was also a slaveholder.

In separate chapters of what is considered his only book, "Notes on the State of Virginia," Jefferson argues both for and against the institution of slavery in the United States. He called it "an abominable crime," and yet he owned approximately 200 slaves in a given year. He even had an intimate affair with one of them, Sally Hemings, with whom he fathered at least one child.

"I don't think Jefferson really knew what to do about slavery," Rothman says. "He knew slavery was wrong, but he was also a racist."

Jefferson struggled, Bernstein says, to reconcile his distaste for slaveholding with his perceived need for it for both the country's and his own economic well-being.



Jefferson wrote of slavery: "We have the wolf by the ear, and we can neither hold him, nor safely let him go. Justice is in one scale, and self-preservation in the other."

"As it is," Jefferson wrote, "we have the wolf by the ear, and we can neither hold him, nor safely let him go. Justice is in one scale, and self-preservation in the other."

"There is clearly this disconnect between what he believed and how he behaved," Rothman says. "There were slaveholders who really didn't see anything wrong with slavery. Jefferson was not one of those people. Knowing something as egregious as slavery is wrong and yet doing nothing about it on a personal level, that's pretty bad."

A Brilliant Man

Still, to many historians, Jefferson's alleged inconsistencies pale in comparison to his accomplishments—many of which resonate in contemporary society. Richard Matthews, author of "The Radical Politics of Thomas Jefferson," says he can reconcile what some scholars see as contradictions in Jefferson's character.

"There is absolutely no doubt," he says, "the guy is a hero."

Concerning the issue of slavery, Matthews argues that, despite his occasionally racist views, Jefferson never wavered on moral decisions. In the original draft of the Declaration of Independence, Matthews points out, Jefferson included a clause condemning slavery; it was dropped by the Continental Congress at the behest of delegates from South Carolina and Georgia.

"When he says 'all men are created equal,' he means it," Matthews says. In fact, Jefferson freed a total of seven slaves in his life, five in his will. Had it not been for his financial ruin, Matthews suggests, he likely would have freed more.

"His great accomplishment was that he put this country in the right direction, making equality a virtue instead of an embarrassment," says Joyce Appleby, professor emerita at UCLA and one of Jefferson's many biographers.

"He was a brilliant man who rendered an enormous service to the nation," says Roger Wilkins, author of a book about the founding fathers and race, titled "Jefferson's Pillow: The Founding Fathers and the Dilemma of Black Patriotism." "He was also weak and self-indulgent."

Defining American

On Dec. 5, 1804, Jefferson was elected to his second term as the third president of the United States. Two hundred years later, his face etched in stone on a South Dakota mountainside, he continues to watch over the nation he helped build. He remains one of the most relevant—and enigmatic—figures in American history.

Most scholars agree: Thomas Jefferson was neither a hero nor a hypocrite—he was both.

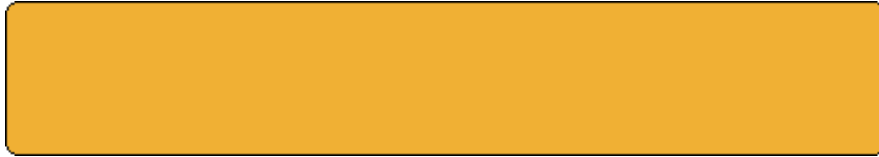
"People are not statues," Rothman says. "Jefferson is just a person. He had some major flaws and some major virtues."

Because of his status as an American icon, however, Jefferson's flaws loom larger than most. "Jefferson articulated our best sense of who we are and who we should be, better than anyone else in American history," Bernstein says. "And because of that, the contradictions are especially painful."

Those contradictions—between a man's ideals and his reality—are as American as they are Jeffersonian.

"Every time you look at this guy, he's a metaphor for the United States in some way or another," Rothman says, as the country continues to struggle over issues such as race and religion and freedom and equality.

"We are still wrestling with problems that Jefferson wrestled with in terms that he coined," Bernstein adds. "When we look at Jefferson, in some ways we are looking at ourselves."



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