Jefferson: Political Writings

Thomas Jefferson (1743–1826) is among the most important and controversial of American political thinkers: his influence (libertarian, democratic, participatory, and agrarian–republican) is still felt today. A prolific writer, Jefferson left 18,000 letters, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, an unfinished *Autobiography*, and numerous other papers. Joyce Appleby and Terence Ball have selected the most important of these for presentation in the *Cambridge Texts* series: Jefferson's views on topics such as revolution, self-government, the role of women, and African-Americans and Native Americans emerge to give a fascinating insight into a man who owned slaves, yet advocated the abolition of slavery. The texts are supported by a concise introduction, suggestions for further reading and short biographies of key figures, all providing invaluable assistance to the student encountering the breadth and richness of Jefferson's thought for the first time.

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THOMAS JEFFERSON

Political Writings

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, CB2 1RP, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge, CB2 2RU, UK http://www.cup.cam.ac.uk
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011–4211, USA http://www.cup.org.
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

First published 1999

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeset in Ehrhardt 9.5/12 pt [WV]

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Jefferson, Thomas, 1743–1826.
[Selections 1999]
Thomas Jefferson, political writings/edited by Joyce Appleby and Terence Ball.
p. cm. – (Cambridge texts in the history of political thought)
ISBN 0 521 64051 2 (hb). – ISBN 0 521 64841 6 (pb)
1. Political science. 2. State, The. 3. United States – Politics and government – Sources.
I. Appleby, Joyce Oldham. II. Ball, Terence. III. Title. IV. Series.
JC176.J4 1999
973.4′6′092–dc21 98–40304 CIP

ISBN 0 521 64051 2 hardback
ISBN 0 521 64841 6 paperback

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Preface

Thomas Jefferson is surely among the most original, complex, and important of American political thinkers. He wrote the Declaration of Independence, served two terms as President, founded the Library of Congress and the University of Virginia, and was also an architect, inventor, scientist, and – amongst his many other complexities – a slave-owner who advocated the abolition of slavery. There is in American political thought a distinctly "Jeffersonian" strain – "small-l" libertarian, democratic, participatory, and agrarian–republican – that has long locked horns with an alternative "Hamiltonian" vision (nationalist, commercial and credit-based, and relying on a strong central government). This tension, sometimes described as "Main Street *vs.* Wall Street," has been a staple of American political thought for more than two centuries. The purpose of the present volume is to give the former a full and fair hearing by letting its main proponent speak at length for himself.

To edit Jefferson's political writings is no easy task. Indeed it is doubly difficult. First, Jefferson was a prolific writer. His complete *Papers*, edited by Julian P. Boyd *et al.* (Princeton, 1950–), have so far taken up twenty-seven fat volumes, bringing that series up to 1793 with no end in sight – he was to live another thirty-three years, during eight of which he was President of the United States. Second, Jefferson wrote no systematic treatise on politics. While he did have a political philosophy, he did not present it whole, as a more systematic thinker might, but expressed his views in a scattered, unsystematic and piecemeal way in his massive and meandering *Notes on the State of Virginia*, a posthumously published

Autobiography, several of his state papers, some 18,000 letters, and elsewhere.

The selection of Jefferson's political writings presented here includes excerpts from his *Notes on the State of Virginia* as well as a generous sampling of his letters, arranged chronologically and by topic (natural rights, revolution, self-government, civic education, the Constitution and Bill of Rights, slavery, religious liberty and toleration, etc.). The present edition also reprints several of Jefferson's most important public papers, including of course his draft of the Declaration of Independence – a more radical document which differed in several significant respects from the version approved by the Congress.

In our Introduction we have tried – not always successfully, we fear – to deal forthrightly with some of the more troubling aspects of Jefferson's life and thinking, including his views about women, race and slavery. This is not a ritualistic bow to the false god of "political correctness"; it stems instead from a recognition that we do in fact, and perhaps inevitably, view and pass judgment on the past from the perspective of the present – including our own understandings of liberty, justice, and equality. In many respects Jefferson was well ahead of his time; in other ways he was very much a man of his time, with all the partialities and prejudices of his age. To recognize and acknowledge this is not to exonerate Thomas Jefferson, and still less ourselves. Quite the contrary. It is also to recognize that we, too, will be judged by our descendants for faults that we fail to see in ourselves. As Vershinin, in Chekhov's *The Three Sisters*, says:

> The things that seem great, significant, and very important to us now will no more seem to be important with time. It's certainly an interesting fact that we cannot possibly know today what in the future will be considered great and important or just pitiful and ridiculous . . . It is quite likely that our present life, to which we are so reconciled, will in time appear to be odd, uncomfortable, stupid, not particularly clean and perhaps even immoral.

Happily, no white Americans of the present generation own slaves; most abhor the evils of racial and sexual discrimination; but we are not without faults of our own, about which we are at best only dimly aware. One of these, about which future generations

could conceivably and justly complain, concerns our excessive present-mindedness and our corresponding failure to take their well-being into adequate (or any) account. And on this and other scores, perhaps, Jefferson still has something to teach us.

We are much indebted to a number of people, and none more than the editors of the Cambridge Texts series. Quentin Skinner and Raymond Geuss have been characteristically generous with their time and their suggestions for improving the present volume. Richard Fisher, our editor at Cambridge University Press, has been himself, which is to say, unfailingly supportive, enthusiastic, and endlessly patient with our delays. James Farr read an early draft of our Introduction and made many helpful suggestions for improving it. We are differently but no less deeply indebted to our extraordinarily able research assistant, Robert W. T. Martin, for his help in identifying and tracking down sometimes elusive sources, and to Barbara Dagger, Michael Mitchell and John Zumbrunnen for further research assistance. We are also grateful to the librarians at the Library of Congress, the Massachusetts Historical Society, the University of Virginia, and to Lucia C. Stanton and her staff at Monticello for supplying several references and items of information.

Finally, though not least, each of the editors wishes to thank the other for the pleasure of the collaboration.

J.A.
T.B.

Introduction

Thomas Jefferson (1743–1826) wrote no systematic treatise on political theory. And yet there is order and system in his unsystematic observations and reflections as found in his only book, in parliamentary manuals, legislative reports, public addresses, executive orders and a voluminous correspondence consisting of some 18,000 letters. It is from these disparate sources that we must glean his political philosophy. He, like the fox, knew a great many things; but, like the hedgehog, he knew and was guided by one big thing – his unswerving belief that people are by nature, and ought to be by law, free to govern themselves. Everything else is either a means or an obstacle to this single overriding end. Tyrannies deny and virtuous republics promote it; ignorance undermines and education encourages it; censorship obscures and a free press reveals it; invasive government negates and self-rule affirms it – but when all is said and done the truth and value of this end is so obvious as to be "self-evident." Jefferson changed his mind about many things; but on this single point his conviction never wavered.

Life and times

Jefferson was born at Shadwell, in Albemarle County, Virginia, in 1743. His father, Peter, a self-educated man of many talents and interests, made his living as a surveyor, map-maker, and farmer. He was also an amateur scientist and musician who passed his love of these and other interests to his son Tom. His mother, Jane Randolph, was of a higher social station than her husband. Several

members of her family feared that she had married beneath her, but by the time of his death in 1757 Peter Jefferson had allayed all doubts about his prospects for worldly success. He bequeathed to his widow and children a sizeable estate, which included more than sixty slaves. It was, as inheritances go, a decidedly mixed blessing.

Three years after his father's death, Jefferson, at age seventeen, enrolled in the College of William and Mary. There he came under the gentle but demanding tutelage of Dr. William Small, a Scotsman who carried his considerable learning lightly and left a deep impression on his pupil. The young Jefferson, already an able classical scholar, was exposed to new discoveries and developments in physics, chemistry, astronomy and botany. He retained throughout his life a keen interest in the natural sciences. No less interesting were the "moral sciences" of ethics, politics, and jurisprudence. Jefferson was schooled in Scottish "moral sense" theory which held that the sense of right and wrong, of just and unjust, is no less real than the physical senses of sight, touch, smell, taste, and hearing. This view, as we shall see, played an important part in forming Jefferson's democratic political sympathies.

After three years at William and Mary, Jefferson turned to the study of law. To the works of Coke, Blackstone, and other legal scholars were added those of Grotius, Pufendorf and Locke, amongst other political theorists. By the time he was admitted to the bar in 1767 Jefferson's learning in the law and allied areas was both wide and deep. Throughout his life he remained a voracious reader and avid bibliophile.

Jefferson's small but growing legal practice was curtailed by his election to the Virginia House of Burgesses, the colonial state legislature, in 1769. Five years later, in 1774, that body was dissolved by the British authorities for its outspoken protests against the "Coercive Acts" passed by Parliament. The Burgesses reconstituted themselves as a revolutionary convention, transforming Jefferson the politician into Jefferson the revolutionary author and activist. *A Summary View of the Rights of British America*, written to give guidance to members of the convention and later published as a pamphlet, consists of a characteristically Jeffersonian mixture of themes and arguments drawn from the tradition of English constitutionalism and from the theory of natural law and natural right.[1] Although

[1] See *infra*, selection II.1.

A Summary View ended on a conciliatory note, the convention believed the language too strong, the tone too strident, and accordingly declined to adopt it. They did, however, elect Jefferson a delegate to the Second Continental Congress in 1774, then meeting in Philadelphia.

When in the following year Jefferson took his seat in the Continental Congress, the first shots had already been fired at Lexington. Revolution was in the air. Ideas and arguments deemed too radical only a year earlier now seemed more acceptable. The young author of *A Summary View* arrived in Philadelphia with, as John Adams later put it, "a reputation for literature, science, and a happy talent of composition."[2] Recognizing this talent, the Congress gave to Jefferson the delicate and dangerous task of drafting a reply to Lord North's last-ditch efforts to damp down the fires of revolution. His second assignment was to write (with John Dickinson of New Jersey) the *Declaration of the Causes and Necessity of Taking Up Arms*.[3] Neither has any of the conciliatory tone of the *Summary View*. The measured militancy of Jefferson's prose prefigures the language of the Declaration of Independence.

On June 7, 1776 Richard Henry Lee of Virginia introduced a resolution in Congress stating "That these United Colonies are, and of right ought to be, free and independent States, that they are absolved from all allegiance to the British Crown, and that all political connection between them and the State of Great Britain is, and ought to be, totally dissolved." Three days later Congress appointed Jefferson to a committee of five of its most eminent members to draft a declaration of independence. The other four – Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, Roger Sherman, and Robert Livingston – deferred to Jefferson, who set to work immediately and soon produced a first draft modeled in part on the English Declaration of Rights of 1689 and on George Mason's early draft of the Virginia Declaration of Rights. Adams and Franklin suggested several small changes, which Jefferson incorporated along with his own revisions before presenting it to the five-man committee. It was approved without amendment and sent at once to the Congress which, after two days of debate, made various changes – several of them quite substantial – to Jefferson's draft. On July 4, 1776 the duly revised Declaration of Independence was adopted by the Congress.

[2] John Adams to Timothy Pickering, Aug. 22, 1822, repr. in Appendix B *infra*.
[3] See *infra*, II.2.

Jefferson's draft Declaration does not coincide at all points with the Declaration as we now know it.[4] To be sure, the famous phrases are the same, as are the overall design and structure – a statement of general principles followed by a bill of particulars detailing the acts of atrocity and tyranny perpetrated by the Crown, and concluding with a pledge of mutual allegiance and solidarity. But Jefferson's draft Declaration is a more strident and radical document than is the one revised and adopted by Congress. Most radical of all, perhaps, is his denunciation of the slave trade, which was struck out of the version edited and approved by the Congress. Thus the document that begins with a ringing affirmation of liberty and equality remains silent on the subject of slavery – a deafening silence noted with particular relish by British critics. "Why is it that we hear the loudest *yelps* for liberty from the drivers of negroes?" asked Samuel Johnson.[5]

Jefferson's Declaration had to do several things at once. He had first and most obviously to declare America's independence to the world. He also had to state the reasons for America's resorting to revolution, and to ground these reasons in principle and in fact. The principles come first, and the facts follow. These are tied together with a Lockean thread.[6] And, not least, Jefferson's task was the rhetorical one of calling upon his countrymen to come together in the common cause of revolution – to risk life, limb and estate for the sake of liberty. To accomplish this, his prose had to persuade and inspire his audience, many of whom could not read. Many Americans would hear the Declaration read aloud at a coffee-house or tavern, or on a street-corner, or sometimes even from a pulpit. Its striking beginning, its measured cadences, its memorable phrases – all are meant to stir republican passions, to instill civic pride, and to kindle revolutionary ardor. The ideas and principles articulated in the Declaration therefore could not be, and were not,

[4] See the alterations highlighted by TJ in his *Autobiography*; *infra*, II.5.

[5] Samuel Johnson, *Taxation No Tyranny: An Answer to the Resolutions and Addresses of the American Congress* (London, 1775); quoted in James Boswell, *Life of Johnson* (1791; Oxford, 1960), p. 876.

[6] Richard Henry Lee stretched the truth only slightly when he said that the Declaration had been "copied from Locke's treatise on government": TJ to Madison, Aug. 30, 1823; *infra*, II.16. For a systematic comparison of the Declaration and Locke's *Second Treatise of Government*, see Garrett Ward Sheldon, *The Political Philosophy of Thomas Jefferson* (Baltimore, 1991), pp. 46–9.

novel. They formed a distillation and articulation of ideas already widely shared.[7] As Jefferson later wrote,

> the object of the Declaration of Independence [was] not to find out new principles, or new arguments, never before thought of, not merely to say things which had never been said before; but to place before mankind the common sense of the subject, in terms so plain and firm as to command their assent . . . Neither aiming at originality of principle or sentiment, nor yet copied from any particular and previous writing, it was intended to be an expression of the American mind . . . All its authority rests then on the harmonizing sentiments of the day, whether expressed in conversation, in letters, printed essays, or in the elementary books of public right, as Aristotle, Cicero, Locke, Sidney, &c.[8]

But if the ideas were well known and widely shared, it was Jefferson's unique way of shaping and articulating them that gave the Declaration its great rhetorical power and lasting fame. Jefferson's Declaration, along with Paine's *Common Sense* and other rousing pro-revolutionary pamphlets, had the desired effect. Independence was declared. The American Revolution had begun.

During the Revolution, Jefferson served as governor of Virginia and as a delegate to the Continental Congress where his draft of a Northwest Ordinance first suggested banning slavery from the American territories to the west.[9] He also undertook a revision of the state's laws and drafted the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom.[10] On the whole, however, these were calamitous years for him. A British raid on Richmond forced him to flee on horseback carrying the state's most critical records and stirred up charges of cowardice, not quieted until after a formal inquiry. His beloved wife died in 1782, leaving him a widower with three daughters to raise. Monticello, the estate he had designed and built on one of the rolling hills of the Virginia Piedmont, then became his domestic retreat, and rebuilding and adorning it his solace and most consistent passion.

[7] See Pauline Maier, *American Scripture: The Making of the Declaration of Independence* (New York, 1997), esp. ch. 2.
[8] TJ to Henry Lee, May 8, 1825; *infra*, II.17.
[9] "Report of Government for the Western Territory," March 22, 1784; *infra*, IX.1.
[10] Jefferson ranked this statute (*infra*, VII.1) as one of his three greatest achievements.

In 1784 Congress appointed Jefferson minister to the court of Louis XVI. For the next four years he fully indulged his tastes for travel, music, literature, architecture, science, and high politics. Naturally gregarious and charming, and a talented violinist and good dancer as well, Jefferson throve in the salons of a Paris teetering on the brink of revolution. Succeeding Benjamin Franklin, he also inherited his friends: Lavoisier, Condorcet, DuPont de Nemours, the Ducs de La Rochefoucauld, and the alluring (and married) Maria Cosway, who prompted Jefferson to pen a poignant colloquy between his head and his heart.[11]

During Jefferson's absence from the United States, his friend and closest political ally, James Madison, spearheaded a movement to replace the wartime Articles of Confederation with a constitution that would rein in the powers of the virtually sovereign thirteen states. Sharing Madison's vision of America's destiny as a continental nation, Jefferson disagreed with those who feared the political awakening of ordinary men which the states' autonomy had fostered. When he heard that an armed band of indebted farmers in western Massachusetts had closed the county courts, Jefferson penned some of his most memorable lines: "The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants. It is it's natural manure."[12] Shays's Rebellion, which fearful conservatives and creditors viewed as part of a larger plot being hatched by democrats and debtors, was seen by Jefferson as a useful purgative of the body politic.

Despite his political foes' attempts to portray him as a lawless radical, Jefferson was in fact deeply committed to the rule of law – at least insofar as it served as a bulwark of the weak against the strong. After receiving the draft Constitution reported out of Philadelphia in 1787, Jefferson noted with dismay its failure to ensure civil liberties. To Madison he confessed his belief "that a bill of rights is what the people are entitled to against every government on earth, general or particular, & what no just government should refuse, or rest on inferences." He then went on to express his reservations about the extended powers created by the Constitution. "I

[11] TJ to Maria Cosway, Oct. 12 1786; *infra*, I.4.
[12] TJ to William Stephens Smith, Nov. 13, 1787; *infra*, II.9. We reproduce TJ's idiosyncratic spelling here and throughout.

own I am not a friend to a very energetic government. It is always oppressive."[13]

During his last days in Paris, Jefferson witnessed the revolutionary actions of 1789 when France's ancient Estates General transformed itself into a modern legislative body. Memories of the Tennis Court Oath, the storming of the Bastille, the abolition of feudal privileges, and the adoption of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen were still fresh in his mind when he arrived in New York City to take up his new duties as George Washington's Secretary of State. The great desideratum of the Federalists, who had recently shepherded the Constitution through the ratification process, was to preserve the fragile coalition of recently united states, to restore the dignity of government, and to attach the rich and well born firmly to the fledgling nation. Fearful that energetic government meant social oppression, Jefferson responded to this program with dismay. After dining with members of President George Washington's cabinet he wrote, "I cannot describe the wonder and mortification with which the table conversations filled me," going on to note that "Politics were the chief topic, and a preference of kingly over republican government was evidently the favorite sentiment. An apostate I could not be, nor yet a hypocrite; and I found myself, for the most part, the only advocate on the republican side . . ."[14] The chief champion of monarchy, and in Jefferson's view the most contemptible of his fellow cabinet members, was his arch-foe Alexander Hamilton, Washington's Secretary of the Treasury.

Despite the odium attached to political factions, Jefferson in the 1790s began to organize an opposition to the Federalists, which he believed to be "an Anglican monarchical, and aristocratical party."[15] His eye on the presidency, he set out, in league with Madison, to reach the voters directly and convince them that they should exert themselves as a sovereign people. At this crucial juncture news reached the United States that the French had executed the king and established a republic. Jefferson and his followers found in the fury of the French Revolution a confirmation that they were living in a revolutionary age and that the time for change had just begun,

[13] TJ to James Madison, Dec. 20, 1787; *infra*, VI.4.
[14] *Autobiography*; *infra*, VIII.13.
[15] TJ to Philip Mazzei, April 24, 1796; *infra*, VIII.4.

and not ended, as the Federalists so fervently wished. Jefferson's warm and early support of the French Revolution was roundly condemned by his Federalist foes who wished to paint him as a wild-eyed radical who, if elected president, would bring the country to anarchy and ruin.

The presidential election campaign of 1800 was among the most vicious in American history. Jefferson was reviled as a radical, a Jacobin, and an atheist. Undeterred by Federalist vilification, Jefferson and his followers engaged the Federalists in a sustained discussion of the most fundamental questions about democratic government. Public debates swirled around specific measures of the Washington and Adams administrations but the Jeffersonians turned the polemics to the larger theme of social distinctions and their political implications. They mocked the aristocratic pretensions of the Federalists and railed at their elitist contempt for ordinary people. They drew attention to the way that the gentry imposed its values, using tacit understandings among gentlemen to thwart literal readings of such terms as popular sovereignty, public servant, natural rights, and free association. They ridiculed the aristocratic norm of not discussing affairs of state "out of doors" by opening and then dismantling the doors that divided office-holders from electors. And, most decisively of all, they won the hard-fought and hotly contested election of 1800.

As President, Jefferson turned himself into an agent of profound and transformative change in the political forms of the new nation. There were many possible futures for the United States. Jefferson seized on one of them, imposing his will upon the federal government and his spirit upon the American electorate. This self-described enemy of "energetic government" proved to be a most energetic President. An extraordinarily attentive administrator, he eliminated domestic taxes, substantially reduced the national debt, let Federalist programs lapse, and shrank the size of the bureaucracy despite the growth in population and territory. Wishing to exorcise all taint of aristocracy, he removed an entire cohort of young Federalists from civil and military offices. Jefferson hastened the conveyance of national land to ordinary farmers and replaced Federalist formality with a degree of informality in matters of protocol that quite amazed foreign dignitaries.[16] He interpreted the Constitution narrowly and

[16] "Rules of Etiquette [for President Jefferson's White House]"; *infra*, 1.10.

strictly, although his 1803 purchase of the Louisiana Territory from France stretched presidential prerogative up to, if not past, the constitutional breaking-point. Not a symbol, civil servant, or presidential initiative escaped his consideration as a tool for dismantling the "energetic" government of his Federalist predecessors.

Fearful that the popular President would win a second term, angry Federalists found a useful instrument in James Callender, a former ally turned enemy when Jefferson refused to appoint him to public office. Callender accused Jefferson of keeping a mulatto mistress named Sally Hemings, one of his slaves at Monticello. "Dusky Sally" was said to have had several children sired by Jefferson. The President, for his part, never responded to stories about this alleged affair.[17] Despite the scandal, fanned by the Federalist press, President Jefferson easily won re-election in 1804. And after his two terms, he had the exceptional good fortune to see the presidency pass successively to two close political allies – James Madison (1809–17) and James Monroe (1817–25).

Leaving the presidency in 1809, Jefferson returned permanently to Monticello where his sole surviving daughter and a houseful of grandchildren awaited him. His long life of public service took a different form as he counseled young admirers, maintained his worldwide correspondence, and completed plans for the University of Virginia visible from his hilltop. It was during this period that he resumed his friendship with John Adams, which resulted in one of the most moving and remarkable correspondences in the history of American letters.[18]

Thomas Jefferson died on July 4, 1826 – exactly fifty years to the day after his Declaration proclaimed America's independence. His old friend John Adams died on the same day. Jefferson was buried on the hillside just below his beloved Monticello. Inscribed on his tombstone are the deeds for which he wished to be remembered, in the order of their importance: "Author of the Declaration of American Independence, of the statute of Virginia for religious freedom, and father of the University of Virginia." There is no mention of his having served two terms as President of the United States.

[17] DNA tests suggest very strongly that TJ fathered at least one son (Eston, b. 1808) by Sally Hemings: see *Nature*, 396 (Nov. 5, 1998), pp. 13–14, 27–8. See also Annette Gordon-Reid, *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: An American Controversy* (Charlottesville, 1997).

[18] Their correspondence is collected in Lester J. Cappon, ed., *The Adams–Jefferson Letters* (Chapel Hill, 1988).

Jefferson as theorist

A number of themes recur throughout Jefferson's writings. Of these, three are particularly prominent. The first is his faith in the common man or, more precisely, the common farmer. Endowed by their Creator with reason and an innate moral sense, ordinary mortals – rightly educated and freed from sophistry, superstition and meddlesome government – are capable of achieving quite extraordinary things. The second is his optimism. Jefferson looked to the future, not to the past, and believed progress possible if perhaps not inevitable. A third theme is his recurring reliance on "nature." A life lived rightly is one lived according to nature's norms and dictates. A government governs rightly only insofar as its laws accord with natural law. Let us look a little more closely at each of these themes.

Jefferson's willingness to trust the common people to govern themselves set him apart from many of his contemporaries, and most especially from his Federalist critics. Writing to John Adams's wife Abigail about the bitterly contested election of 1800, he focused upon the contrasting concerns that continued to animate the two parties. "One fears most the ignorance of the people: the other the selfishness of rulers independant of them."[19] Although Jefferson tactfully conceded that time alone would tell which was right, he could not resist noting that the conservatives' fear of the people had prevailed a long time without promoting the good of the people. Later, in a letter to John Adams, Jefferson contrasted "the enemies of reform" with those who believed with him that no limits could be placed on the progress possible in both social institutions and scientific knowledge. Still eager to define their differences thirteen years after his victory, Jefferson summed them up in opposing pairs: the belief in "the improvability of the human mind" *vs.* the denial that such improvement is possible; "the progress of science" *vs.* the veneration of custom and tradition; the "reformation of institutions" *vs.* "steady adherence to the principles, practices and institutions of our fathers."[20]

Jefferson's trust in the common man follows from his conviction that the Creator had endowed all men with reason and a moral

[19] TJ to Abigail Adams, Sept. 11, 1804; *infra*, VIII.8.
[20] TJ to Adams, June 15, 1813; *infra*, XIII.2.

sense. "The moral sense, or conscience, is as much a part of man as his leg or arm. It is given to all human beings in a stronger or weaker degree . . . It may be strengthened by exercise."[21] For republican government to survive and freedom flourish, the moral sense and civic capacities of ordinary men must be strengthened by education, in the broadest sense of that term. Theoretical and historical knowledge gleaned from books must be supplemented by practical knowledge derived from experience. The citizens of a free republic can best sharpen their civic sensibilities by participating in politics at the local level. To this end Jefferson envisaged a system of decentralized and self-governing "ward republics." "I consider the continuance of republican government as absolutely hanging on these two hooks," he wrote, "the public education and the subdivision of counties into wards."[22] "These will be pure and elementary republics, the sum of all which, taken together, composes the State, and will make the whole a true democracy as to the business of the wards, which is that of nearest and daily concern."[23]

Without local control and eternal vigilance, the liberty of the people is in constant danger from the predations of the powerful. The best, indeed the only, antidote to concentrated power is power diffused among the people themselves. This indeed is what Jefferson means by "the term *republic*":

> [W]e may say with truth and meaning, that governments are more or less republican, as they have more or less of the element of popular election and control in their composition; and believing, as I do, that the mass of the citizens is the safest depository of their own rights and especially, that the evils flowing from the duperies of the people, are less injurious than those from the egoism of their agents, I am a friend to that composition of government which has in it the most of this ingredient.[24]

Another noteworthy feature of Jefferson's character and his political philosophy is his love of the new and heretofore untrodden path. He was by temperament and conviction an optimist with an

[21] TJ to Peter Carr, Aug. 10, 1787; *infra*, IV.6.
[22] TJ to Joseph Cabell, Jan. 31, 1814; *infra*, III.19.
[23] TJ to Samuel Kercheval, Sept. 5, 1816; *infra*, III.26.
[24] TJ to John Taylor, May 28, 1816; *infra*, III.22.

almost unbounded faith in the future and a radical with a distaste for the old and the orthodox. One of the most damning things Jefferson could say about his Federalist opponents was that they had looked "backwards not forwards, for improvement." And although they favored education, "it was to be the education of our ancestors." President Adams had actually told audiences that "we were never to expect to go beyond them in real science." But the political triumph of the Jeffersonian movement means that "we can no longer say there is nothing new under the sun. For this whole chapter in the history of man is new. The great extent of our Republic is new. Its sparse habitation is new. The mighty wave of public opinion which has rolled over it is new."[25]

The greatest danger to the new American Republic was that it would grow old and feeble and infirm. Its citizens and leaders could lose their nerve and their love of the new, and settle comfortably into their dotage. To postpone such civic sclerosis, Jefferson advocated a number of strategies. The most radical of these was to have a revolution every generation. Such a revolution need not be violent; it can be brought about by ballots instead of bullets. Indeed, Jefferson saw his own election to the presidency as a second American Revolution "as real a revolution in the principles of our government as that of 1776 was in its form."[26]

Among other less precipitous ways of keeping the citizenry virtuous and vigilant was the education of the public. One of the chief aims of civic education was the inculcation of attitudes of skepticism toward tradition and the past, and even toward the Constitution itself. Inasmuch as the veneration of historical documents could be used to inhibit change, Jefferson chided those who looked upon constitutions with "sanctimonious reverence, and deem them like the ark of the covenant, too sacred to be touched," adding that

> I am certainly not an advocate for frequent and untried changes in laws and constitutions. I think moderate imperfections had better be borne with . . . But I know also, that laws and institutions must go hand in hand with the progress of the human mind. As that becomes more developed, more enlightened, as new discoveries are made, new truths disclosed . . . institutions

[25] TJ to Joseph Priestley, March 21, 1801; *infra*, XIII.1.
[26] TJ to Spencer Roane, Sept. 6, 1819; *infra*, VI.12.

> must advance also, and keep pace with the times. We might as well require a man to wear still the coat which fitted him when a boy, as civilized society to remain ever under the regimen of their barbarous ancestors.[27]

John Adams was surely right when he remarked that Jefferson "like[d] better the dreams of the Future, than the History of the Past."[28]

The future social and civic order of which Jefferson dreamed required a significant reworking of traditional ideas about time and history. In classical republican thought, time brought cycles of degeneration against which mere mortals labored largely in vain. Corruption could be slowed but not stopped. Jeffersonian discourse, by contrast, embedded the idea of time in the dynamic concepts of process, development and progress. The future would be fundamentally different because underlying processes were slowly but surely transforming society. As strictly as any French *philosophe*, Jefferson marked his own age as a great divide. In the past lay superstition, sophistry, and priestcraft; in the future, science, progress and the growth of knowledge. A salutary "change has sensibly taken place in the mind of man. Science has liberated the ideas of those who read and reflect . . . An insurrection has consequently begun, of science, talents, and courage, against rank and birth, which have fallen into contempt . . . Science is progressive . . ."[29] The burden of old ways of thinking, of prescientific prejudices and antediluvian conceits, of controlling institutions, had to be shed once and for all. Only liberation from archaic authorities of all kinds would lift the dead hand of the past off the shoulders of present and future generations.

Logically, this expectation of almost inexorable improvement undercut the importance of past knowledge, an attitude that Jefferson nicely epitomized when extolling modern forms of representation. "The introduction of this new principle of representative democracy," he said, "has rendered useless almost everything written before on the structure of government." He then adds the startling suggestion that this fact "in a great measure, relieves our regret,

[27] TJ to Samuel Kercheval, July 12, 1816; *infra*, III.23.
[28] John Adams to TJ, Aug. 9, 1816, in Cappon, ed., *Adams–Jefferson Letters*, p. 487.
[29] TJ to John Adams, Oct. 28, 1813; *infra*, III.16.

if the political writings of Aristotle, or of any other ancient, have been lost."[30] This, however, is Jefferson at his most hyperbolic. For, far from delivering the *coup de grâce* to classical learning, he emphasized repeatedly its continuing relevance and importance. "For classical learning I have ever been a zealous advocate," he wrote, and that zeal was amply evident in his design of the curriculum of the University of Virginia.[31]

A third noteworthy feature of Jefferson's political thought is the myriad ways in which it relies upon appeals to "nature." His writings abound with references to nature, to natural right, to natural law and the laws of nature. In the Declaration he famously invokes "the laws of nature and of nature's God." An ardent enthusiast for the natural sciences, Jefferson declared Newton, Locke and Bacon the greatest of all great men.[32] His amateur scientific curiosity never flagged, nor did his belief that the orderly and predictable processes of nature offered a better model for society than any that could be devised by legislatures. Not man-made laws, but nature, secured human needs. He spoke of "the natural right of trading with our neighbors" and grounded property in "the natural wants" of men.[33] The claim that there is a universal and uniform "human nature" carried considerable political import. The assertion of an underlying uniformity in the face of conspicuous human differences enabled the Jeffersonians to enlist nature in the war against hierarchical society. Claiming to interpret the laws of nature, Jefferson described a complex intellectual trajectory that linked the American nation to a grand human destiny. Where traditional society recognized a variety of statuses, ethnic groups, and regional identities, Jeffersonians obliterated that variety in the celebration of all free men, except where, as Jefferson wrote, "the difference is fixed in nature."[34]

It is just here that the darker side of Jefferson's Enlightenment faith in nature and the natural emerges in ways that shock modern sensibilities. The "nature" to which Jefferson so frequently

[30] TJ to Isaac H. Tiffany, Aug. 26, 1816; *infra*, III.24.
[31] TJ to Dr. Thomas Cooper, Oct. 7, 1814 (*infra*, IV.20) and his *Report of the Commissioners for the University of Virginia*, 1818 (*infra*, IV.23).
[32] TJ to Dr. Benjamin Rush, Jan. 16, 1811; *infra*, VIII.10.
[33] Quoted in John Dewey, ed., *The Living Thoughts of Thomas Jefferson* (New York, 1940), p. 75; TJ to Pierre-Samuel DuPont de Nemours, April 24, 1816 (*infra*, II.14).
[34] Jefferson, *Notes on Virginia*, Query XIV; *infra*, IX.6.

appealed endowed ordinary white men with the capacity for self-government even as it denied that capacity to women and people of color. He expected nature to ratify the conventional exclusion of women, African-Americans, and Native Americans from the ranks of autonomous people. Forming far too large and important a presence in Jefferson's world to be ignored, their exclusion demarcates the boundary of Jefferson's reforming zeal. His prejudices and preconceptions about black Africans, Native Americans, and women were widely if not universally shared in his day. In Jefferson's case these attitudes are reinforced by his repeated recourse to nature and natural law. A mighty liberator in the face of historic privilege, natural law doctrine raised its own form of exclusion. Indeed, nature, when viewed as forever fixed and universal, could discriminate just as effectively as society.

Jefferson assumed without argument that women were by their very nature excluded from the public realm. They think naturally of home and hearth, of husband and children, and rarely (if at all) of wider public concerns. They are therefore rightly excluded from voting and holding public office. To have believed otherwise was conceivable, for others far less bold than Jefferson had recognized women's capacity for citizenship and public office. When his Secretary of the Treasury Albert Gallatin, concerned about the shortage of talented applicants for government office, suggested naming women to certain posts, Jefferson's reply was curt: "The appointment of a woman to office is an innovation for which the public is not prepared, nor am I."[35] Women, as he explained to several correspondents, were formed by nature for men's need and pleasure, and suited by nature for domestic, not political, life. "The tender breasts of ladies were not formed for political convulsion," Jefferson wrote, and women "miscalculate much their own happiness when they wander from the true field of their influence into that of politicks."[36] Indeed, a good part of the pleasure of women's company comes from their having little or no interest in politics. Men need respite from the demands of public life, and the company of women supplies that relief. The "good ladies" of America, unlike the busybodies of Paris, "have been too wise to wrinkle their

[35] TJ to Albert Gallatin, Jan. 13, 1807; *infra*, XI.4.
[36] TJ to Angelica Schuyler Church, Sept. 21, 1788; in J. P. Boyd *et al.*, eds., *Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, XIII, p. 623.

foreheads with politics. They are contented to soothe and calm the minds of their husbands returning ruffled from political debate. They have the good sense to value domestic happiness above all other, and the art to cultivate it beyond all other."[37] Men's inferiors in politics, women are men's valued companions at home.

For Native Americans, it was not so much innate inferiority as cultural obstinacy that accounted for their disqualifying differences. Jefferson was enough of an Enlightenment *philosophe* to have a certain regard and respect for "noble savages" living in harmony with nature. But living in harmony with nature was one thing, and living harmoniously with an ever-increasing number of European settlers was quite another. It was up to the American Indians to accommodate the newcomers, not the other way around. Those who refused to accept the newly arrived and land-hungry inhabitants were to be driven westward or even exterminated. In 1780, Governor Jefferson wrote to the revolutionary frontier leader, George Rogers Clark, about how best to deal with "those tribes of Indians between the Ohio and Illinois rivers who have harassed us with eternal hostilities, and whom experience has shewn to be incapable of reconciliation . . . If we are to wage a campaign against these Indians the end proposed should be their extermination, or their removal beyond the lakes of the Illinois river. The same world will scarcely do for them and us."[38] For the less warlike and more accommodating tribes Jefferson proposed profound changes in their way of life. If they are to survive, they must exchange the nomadic life of the hunter for the settled life of the farmer.[39]

Jefferson's views on black Africans are, to modern eyes, no less benighted and backward than his views regarding women and Native Americans. Several remarks in his *Notes on the State of Virginia* suggest that he held views that we would today term racist. African-Americans, Jefferson wrote, were "inferior to the whites in the endowments both of body and mind." These views he advances "as a suspicion only," and not as a settled conviction.[40] His suspicion appears to have been undermined as he grew older. In a letter to Benjamin Banneker – a black astronomer and mathema-

[37] TJ to Anne Willing Bingham, May 11, 1788; *infra*, XI.2.
[38] TJ to George Rogers Clark, Jan. 1, 1780, in Boyd, *et al.*, eds., *Papers*, III, p. 259.
[39] Second Inaugural Address, March 4, 1805; *infra*, X.9.
[40] *Notes on Virginia*; *infra*, IX.6.

tician much admired by Jefferson, who as President had appointed him official surveyor of the District of Columbia – Jefferson wrote: "No body wishes more than I do to see such proofs as you exhibit, that nature has given to our black brethren, talents equal to those of the other colors of men, and that the appearance of a want of them is owing merely to the degraded condition of their existence, both in Africa and America."[41] Jefferson later expressed further doubts about his earlier views on race: "no person living wishes more sincerely than I do, to see a complete refutation of the doubts I have myself entertained and expressed on the grade of understanding allotted to them by nature . . . My doubts [in the *Notes on Virginia*] were the result of personal observation on the limited sphere of my own State [i.e., Virginia] where the opportunities for the development of their genius were not favorable." Jefferson then adds that *even if* one individual or race were more intelligent or talented than another, that fact carries no moral or political weight: "their degree of talent . . . is no measure of their rights. Because Sir Isaac Newton was superior to others in understanding, he was not therefore lord of the person or property of others."[42]

And yet Jefferson was himself lord and master of some two hundred black slaves whom he bought and sold. He knew that slavery was an evil institution; but he remained immersed in and indebted to the very institution whose evils he so eloquently condemned. The ardent champion of republican liberty denied that liberty to his human "property." What to modern eyes looks like a rank contradiction between Jefferson's political theory and his personal practice was not universally so regarded in Jefferson's day. Many an *ante bellum* Southern writer noted that just as the republics of antiquity – Athens, Sparta, Rome – had relied on the labor of slaves, so would and should the American Republic. The right to liberty belongs to citizens only; to deny that liberty to non-citizens – women, resident aliens, and slaves – is therefore quite consistent with republican principles and no violation of anyone's rights.[43]

But Jefferson never subscribed to such a view. The right to liberty is a human, not a civil, right; and slavery is quite clearly and

[41] TJ to Benjamin Banneker, Aug. 30, 1791; *infra*, IX.9.
[42] TJ to Henri Grégoire, Feb. 25, 1809; *infra*, IX.15.
[43] See Rogers M. Smith, *Civic Ideals: Conflicting Views of Citizenship in US History* (New Haven, 1997), p. 86.

unequivocally a violation of that right. Jefferson never ceased to decry "those violations of human rights which have been so long continued on the unoffending inhabitants of Africa."[44] But neither in life nor in death did he practice what he preached. In his will Jefferson freed only five of his approximately two hundred slaves, most of whom were sold to pay his enormous debts. Where slavery was concerned, Jefferson's deeds did not match his magnificent words.

Yet in the end it was Jefferson's words – his power as author – that outstripped and transcended his prejudices as a man. Like some Sorcerer's Apprentice, he had got hold of and articulated a vision whose power he felt but whose full implications he barely comprehended. His words and phrases – most especially those of the Declaration of Independence – would later be borrowed, repeated, and refashioned for purposes that Jefferson did not intend, could not foresee, and almost certainly could not have imagined.[45] When in 1848 the delegates at the Seneca Falls conference sought a model for their own declaration of feminist principles, they turned almost immediately to Jefferson's Declaration.[46] The ex-slave and ardent Abolitionist Frederick Douglass looked back to the Declaration's color-blind and universal principles for inspiration and legitimation. And Abraham Lincoln saw in Jefferson's Declaration the real charter of American liberty for all, black and white alike. A product of political compromise, the Constitution had recognized, and thus legitimized, slavery; the Declaration in its magnificent abstractness had not. Thus the "four score and seven years" before Lincoln's 1863 Gettysburg Address locates 1776 as America's better origin and the real birth-date of the republic. If America had originated in an "idea," then Jefferson was father to the thought.

Skeptics rightly regard Lincoln's view of Jefferson and the Declaration as wishful thinking, as political propaganda, as balm for the wounds of civil war, and subsequently as a mainstay of an American civil religion. One has gone so far as to claim that Lincoln's Gettys-

[44] Sixth Annual Message to Congress, Dec. 2, 1806; in P. L. Ford, ed., *Writings of Thomas Jefferson* (New York, 1892–9), VIII, p. 492.

[45] For a sampling of the uses to which Jefferson's Declaration was later put, see Philip S. Foner, ed., *We the Other People: Alternative Declarations of Independence by Labor Groups, Farmers, Women's Rights Advocates, Socialists, and Blacks, 1829–1975* (Urbana, 1976).

[46] Seneca Falls Declaration (1848); *infra*, Appendix C.

burg Address was a "giant (if benign) swindle" and "one of the most daring acts of open-air sleight-of-hand ever witnessed by the unsuspecting." So successful was Lincoln that he single-handedly gave the Americans "a new past . . . that would change their future indefinitely."[47]

Yet it is through this and allied channels that Jefferson's ideas have entered and become part of mainstream political thought in America and beyond. The American civil rights movement of the 1960s more readily invoked the ideas of the slave-owning Sage of Monticello than of any others. The Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., quoted Jefferson almost as readily as he quoted scripture; indeed, one might almost say that he, like Lincoln a century earlier, quoted Jefferson's words *as* scripture – uniquely and readily recognizable "American scripture," as one critic has complained.[48] For better or worse, Jefferson the man has been supplanted by Jefferson the legend.

Perhaps a little less attention to the legend, and more careful attention to Thomas Jefferson's own words, and the highly charged political contexts in which he wrote them, will supply a more balanced and nuanced picture of this remarkably complex and sometimes contradictory American political thinker.

[47] See Garry Wills, *Lincoln at Gettysburg: Words that Made American History* (New York, 1992), p. 38.
[48] See Maier, *American Scripture*, ch. 4.

Chronology

1743	(13 April) Born at Shadwell, Albemarle County, Virginia
1757	His father, Peter Jefferson, dies
1760–2	Attends College of William and Mary
1762	Studies law under George Wythe
1764	Inherits father's sizeable estate
1765	(March 22) Stamp Act passed by British Parliament; (May 30) Patrick Henry's Virginia Resolves passed; (Oct. 7–24) Stamp Act Congress meets in New York
1766	(March 18) Parliament repeals Stamp Act
1767	Admitted to the Virginia bar; (June 26, 29, July 2) Townshend Acts passed by Parliament
1768	Elected to the Virginia House of Burgesses; (Sept. 22) Massachusetts Convention; British troops sent to Boston
1769	Designs and begins building Monticello ("little mountain") on hilltop near Charlottesville; (May 16) Virginia Resolutions passed
1772	(1 Jan.) Marries Martha Wayles Skelton; (27 Sept.) daughter Martha ("Patsy") born at Monticello; Committees of Correspondence commence
1773	Father-in-law John Wayles dies; inherits 11,000 acres, 135 slaves, and massive debts that plague him to the end of his life; (16 Dec.) Boston Tea Party
1774	Coercive Acts passed by Parliament; Virginia House of Burgesses dissolved by British authorities; Burgesses

	reconstitute as a revolutionary convention; Jefferson elected delegate to First Continental Congress; retires from legal practice; birth of daughter Jane Randolph
1775	Publishes *A Summary View of the Rights of British America*; elected to Second Continental Congress; daughter Jane Randolph dies; (April 19) battles of Lexington and Concord; (June 17) battle of Bunker Hill
1776	(July 4) Declaration of Independence adopted by Congress; mother Jane Randolph Jefferson dies
1777	Drafts Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom; Articles of Confederation drafted by Congress; son is born but dies shortly thereafter
1778	Drafts Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge; daughter Mary (Maria) born
1779–81	Governor of Virginia
1780	Begins writing *Notes on the State of Virginia*; daughter Lucy Elizabeth born
1782	His wife, Martha Jefferson, dies; deeply despondent, Jefferson retreats to Monticello
1783	Elected delegate to Congress; (Sept. 3) peace treaty with Great Britain signed
1784	Daughter Lucy Elizabeth dies
1784–9	Serves as Commissioner and U.S. Minister to France; observes outbreak of French Revolution
1786	Shays's Rebellion in Massachusetts
1787	*Notes on the State of Virginia* published in London; (May 25–Sept. 17) Constitutional Convention meets in Philadelphia; Ratification Debate begins
1789	Named Secretary of State by President Washington
1794	Retires to private life; returns to Monticello
1796	Elected Vice-President of the United States; serves in Administration of John Adams, second President of U.S.
1800	Elected President of the United States
1801	(March 4) First Inaugural Address articulates key principles of what has come to be known as "Jeffersonian" democracy
1802	Accused by disappointed office-seeker of having an

	affair with, and fathering children by, Sally Hemings, one of his slaves at Monticello
1803	*Marbury* v. *Madison* establishes precedent that the Supreme Court can declare acts of Congress unconstitutional; Louisiana Territory purchased from France, more than doubling the size of the American Republic
1804	Lewis and Clark Expedition launched to explore and map newly acquired Louisiana Territory; Jefferson re-elected President; daughter Maria dies
1805	Lewis and Clark reach Pacific coast
1807	Rejects pleas that he run for a third term as President; announces impending retirement from political life; Great Britain outlaws slave trade in all its colonies
1808	James Madison elected President; U.S. law prohibits importation of African slaves
1809	Second term as President ends; retires to Monticello
1812	Responds favorably to John Adams's overtures that the two resume their correspondence
1812–14	War of 1812
1814	British burn U.S. Capitol; President Madison and Congress forced to flee to avoid capture
1815	Deepening debts force Jefferson to sell his 6,700-volume library to Congress; becomes basis of the Library of Congress
1819	Founds the University of Virginia
1821	Writes *Autobiography* for his own and family's use
1825	University of Virginia opens
1826	(July 4) Jefferson dies at Monticello; John Adams dies on same day