



2003 Shaping the World: Conversation on Democracy “The Object of our Mission”

Thomas Jefferson confers with Meriwether Lewis

Thomas Jefferson

1743-1826

Third president of the United States; principal author of the Declaration of Independence. Born April 13, 1743, in Shadwell, Virginia. His father, Peter Jefferson, was a surveyor who built a substantial estate including approximately 60 African-American slaves; he died in 1757. His mother, the former Jane Randolph, was a member of one of Virginia's most prominent families. Jefferson was the eldest of two sons; he also had six sisters.

In 1760, Jefferson entered the College of William & Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia. He studied law with the state's leading legal scholar, George Wythe (later a member of the Constitutional Convention), from 1762 to 1767, then began practicing, mostly handling cases involving land claims. In 1768, Jefferson designed and built a home of his own, which he eventually named Monticello, atop an 867-foot-high mountain near his birthplace in Shadwell. That same year, he won a seat in the Virginia legislature, then called the House of Burgesses. Jefferson's marriage in 1772 to Martha Wayles Skelton, a young widow with an impressive dowry, more than doubled his holdings in land and slaves. He and Martha went on to have six children, only two of whom survived until adulthood.

In the years leading up to the American Revolution, Jefferson was a prominent voice in the growing opposition within Virginia to the British Parliament's taxation policies and Britain's general control over the American colonies. In a treatise entitled *A Summary View of the Rights of British America* (published without his permission in 1774), Jefferson argued that America's bonds to Britain and King George III were wholly voluntary.

In the spring of 1775, Jefferson was appointed as a delegate to the Second Continental Congress in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. A shy and soft-spoken man, he was regarded as a superior writer and was named to a five-person committee [along with John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Roger Sherman and Robert Livingston] charged with drafting a formal statement of the reasons for the colonies' impending break with Britain. In just a few days, Jefferson wrote the first draft of the document that would become the Declaration of Independence, listing the grievances against George III and offering this seminal statement of democratic values: “We hold these truths to be self-evident; that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness; that to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.”

Though the Continental Congress substantially revised Jefferson's text, it left that passage untouched. The Declaration of Independence—which was signed on July 4, 1776—was viewed as a collaborative effort by the entire Congress. Jefferson was not widely known as its principal author until the 1790s.

Upon his return to Virginia in October 1776, Jefferson began his efforts to reform the state's legal code in order to bring it more in line with the revolutionary principles of equality, especially in the areas of distribution of property and education. In addition, Jefferson caused a good deal of controversy with his strong advocacy of religious freedom and the separation between church and state. In 1779, Jefferson was elected governor of Virginia. He had a difficult tenure, earning harsh criticism on account of the embarrassing collapse of the state's defenses during the British invasion of Virginia in 1780-1781. In addition to his professional frustrations during this period, personal tragedy struck Jefferson in September 1782, when his wife Martha died after the difficult birth of their third daughter several months earlier.

As the Revolutionary War drew to a close, Jefferson was called upon to serve as a delegate to the Continental Congress in December 1782, during which he drafted the policy regarding the entrance of the Western territories into the new United States. Shortly thereafter, he agreed to succeed Benjamin Franklin as the American minister to France, moving to Paris in 1784.

Jefferson was unable to accomplish much diplomatically during these years, not in the least because France was simmering with its own revolutionary and class conflict in the wake of America's triumph over Britain. For his part, Jefferson was fortunate enough to leave France in late 1789, just before Paris erupted into mob violence. Upon his return to America, he took office as the first secretary of state, under George Washington, the heroic Revolutionary general and newly elected president of the United States. As secretary of state, Jefferson was largely responsible for the new nation's foreign policy; he took a decidedly pro-French viewpoint in the long-running conflict between Britain and France. Aside from foreign policy, Jefferson was extremely vocal in the debate surrounding the new Constitution—his greatest concern about the all-important document was that it made the federal government too powerful, as it lacked a bill of rights to protect the rights of states and individuals from federal encroachment.

In 1793, Jefferson stepped down from the office of secretary of state and returned to Virginia. Three years later, he finished a close second in the race for the presidency against old friend and current political rival John Adams, all the while denying publicly that he was even a candidate. As the runner-up, Jefferson became Adams' vice president. In that office, he continued his opposition of the emphasis on a strong federal government espoused by such men as Washington, Adams, and Alexander Hamilton, who had become known as Federalists. By the mid-1790s, two distinct camps had emerged: the Federalists and the Republicans, led by Jefferson and James Madison, which essentially represented America's first opposition party. During this period, his critics labeled Jefferson a traitor and hypocrite, pointing out that even as he denounced divisions or "factions" as destructive to government, he was himself a divisive influence.

The presidential election of 1800 proved to be an extremely heated battle. As the electoral process originally set down in the Constitution did not allow voters to differentiate between their choices for president and vice president, Jefferson and his chosen vice presidential candidate, Aaron Burr, a U.S. senator from New York, tied for the most votes, although Jefferson was clearly the voters' choice for president. The election was thus thrown into the House of Representatives, where Jefferson proved victorious after several weeks of debate.

Jefferson's election as president marked the first ever transfer of power from one "party" to another in the history of the young nation. Many feared that a Jefferson presidency, with its

emphasis on the rights of states and individuals over the authority of the central government, would be dangerous, perhaps fatal, to the nascent federal institutions created by the Constitution. In his inaugural address on March 4, 1801, Jefferson sounded a strong conciliatory note, stating famously that “we are all republicans—we are all federalists.” In addition, the new president voiced his desire to return to the principles of the Revolution and of the Declaration of Independence and articulated his faith in the power of human reason as the guiding principle of self-government. His emphasis, as always, was on the necessity of limited central authority and protection of individual rights.

The major accomplishment of Jefferson’s first term undoubtedly came in 1803, when France sold the United States the entire Louisiana region—an expanse of land stretching from the Mississippi Valley to the Rocky Mountains—for \$15 million. The Louisiana Purchase, along with the subsequent exploratory journey throughout the new territory led by Jefferson’s private secretary Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, would go down in history as one of the boldest executive actions ever. Although a tremendous bargain by any standards, the deal substantially increased the national debt; nonetheless, Jefferson could not turn down the chance to double America’s domain and remove the threat of France from the nation’s borders. More importantly, the idealistic Jefferson saw in the Western territories the future of his republican vision—the West was the place where Jefferson’s optimistic dreams of the small independent farmer and the unlimited power of his individuality and autonomy would replay themselves again and again.

Reelected by a landslide in 1804, Jefferson nonetheless faced lingering attacks on his administration from the small but vocal groups of Federalist opponents that remained. His second term was marred by the highly unpopular Embargo Act (1807), which prohibited U.S. exports in order to protest British and French violations of American neutrality following the resumption of the Napoleonic Wars. The embargo hurt the U.S. far more than England or France, as it stunted the younger nation’s budding economy and had little effect on the two established superpowers.

Jefferson declined to seek a third term in 1808, instead retiring to his beloved Virginia to continue his intellectual, philosophical, and architectural pursuits. President of the American Philosophical Society from 1797 to 1815, Jefferson enjoyed his intellectual and philosophical life far more than his impressive record of legislative and executive achievements. Over the next 17 years, the much-relieved Jefferson concentrated on his home and lush gardens at Monticello, the building of his retreat home Poplar Forest in Bedford County and the overseeing of the plantation, his voluminous correspondence (one year he reportedly wrote over 1,200 letters), and various other intellectual pursuits.

Jefferson’s passionate love for architecture, philosophy, and education came together in the founding of the University of Virginia (UVA) at Charlottesville, chartered in 1819. His influence on the school was far-reaching, as he designed the buildings, planned the curriculum, and selected the faculty. At the time of its opening in 1825, UVA was unique among American universities, in that it had no religious affiliation or requirements and no president or administration, except for a self-enforced honor system.

Jefferson’s devotion to neoclassical architecture (stately white columns abound at UVA) also showed itself in his constant renovations of Monticello, the impressive home that he had designed to reflect the democratic principles that he held so dear. He also worked tirelessly on

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© Thomas Jefferson’s Poplar Forest

his smaller, more private residence in Bedford [Poplar Forest], about 90 miles away, where he would often retreat from the hubbub of his family, his slaves, and his constant visitors at Monticello. In the later years of his life, his expensive lifestyle began to take its toll, and Jefferson sank deeper and deeper into debt. Jefferson owned as many as 200 slaves at any one point, probably a total of 600 in his lifetime. Monticello—along with most of his slaves—were auctioned off after his death in order to pay the family's debts.

A complex and sometimes enigmatic figure, Jefferson's inconsistencies are nowhere more visible than in his views on slavery. In the fall of 1781, while serving as governor of Virginia, Jefferson published a treatise called *Notes on the State of Virginia*, in which he explicitly discussed slavery. While he asserted that the institution of slavery violated the principles of the Declaration of Independence and that it would eventually have to be abolished, Jefferson also explicitly delineated the reasons why blacks were inferior to whites. With the controversial *Notes*, Jefferson established himself as one of the more progressive voices in the South on the issue of slavery, particularly among wealthy planters.

From 1789 on, after he returned from Paris, Jefferson's position changed. He became less of a leader on the slavery issue, holding that while ultimately slavery should be abolished, for the present it was impossible. In 1819, during congressional debate over Missouri's admission into the union of states, Jefferson advocated the extension of slavery into the Western territories, a reversal of his view during the 1780s. Jefferson was one of many Southerners who criticized the Missouri Compromise—which admitted Missouri as a slave state and Maine as a free state but ruled out slavery in the rest of the Louisiana Purchase north of latitude 36°30—as an undemocratic abuse of power by the federal government. Writing to Congressman John Holmes, Jefferson saw portents of civil war and expressed his own, and the nation's, dilemma over slavery: "We have the wolf by the ears, and we can neither hold him, nor safely let him go." (Ironically, 37 years later, by agreeing with Jefferson and ruling in *Dred Scott v. Sandford* that the Missouri Compromise was unconstitutional, the Supreme Court hastened the arrival of the conflict he feared.)

Apart from Jefferson's philosophical stance on slavery, there was the paradox inherent in his own life. Though he undoubtedly believed that slavery violated the principles of natural law he had included in the Declaration of Independence, he was a wealthy slave owner whose lifestyle depended upon the institution. Jefferson viewed himself and his slaves as victims of mankind's failure to rid itself of this terrible institution, and he contented himself with the idea that he would be a benevolent master to those he owned, until the "peculiar institution" met with its rightful end.

Despite his inconsistencies and imperfections, Thomas Jefferson was a man of high ideals—he valued his achievements in the realm of political thought and philosophy above any legislative triumphs. In 1812, he began a famous correspondence with his old friend, political rival, and fellow champion of the American Revolution—John Adams. Their exchange of words and ideas continued for the next 14 years, until their deaths, only hours apart—Jefferson at his beloved Monticello, Adams at home in Quincy, Massachusetts—on July 4, 1826, the 50th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. In his chosen epitaph, Jefferson made no mention of his eight years as America's president, leaving behind a vision of this deeply complex man the way he himself wanted to be remembered: "Thomas Jefferson: Author of the

[Declaration of American Independence](#), of the Statute of Virginia for Religious Freedom, and Father of the [University of Virginia](#).”

Writings

[Declaration of Independence](#)
[Statute of Virginia for Religious Freedom](#)

Biographical information adapted from Biography.Com Online Database.