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PLACE

Melissa
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Partial Fulfillment: The Vision of Thomas Jefferson

When reflecting upon the ideals and principles embodied in the life and career of Thomas Jefferson, it becomes evident that many of his words and ideas have withstood the test of time. However, due to the vast changes in American society since Jefferson's death, other principles included in his vision for the infant republic are no longer practical in contemporary American society. Jefferson's view of America as being a nation tied to agriculture is no longer realistic, nor would his view of a country governed by elite, white land owners be possible today. Furthermore, his assumption that a democracy should periodically renew itself through rebellion would lead to chaos today. On the other hand, Jefferson's advocacy of the separation of church and state, his strong commitment to education, and his optimism that reasonable human beings can determine their own future are ideals that have endured since his death, both enriching and strengthening our nation.

Despite Jefferson's foresight, some of his principles and ideals have not proved practical for American society. Jefferson was unprepared for the nation's transformation into an industrial society. Believing that the growth of the nation was dependent on the growth of agriculture, Jefferson did not foresee the prosperity of an America whose economy was not based on an agrarian lifestyle. Furthermore, Jefferson viewed industrialization as a threat to the stability of the republic, thinking it would cause class divisions between the rich and the poor, which would ultimately result in a politically volatile situation.¹ His idea of trade was the exportation of agricultural products, not the ongoing cycle of buying, selling, and trading that we have today. Along with the fear of industrialization, Jefferson despised banks, the stock market, and cities which he perceived as dwellings for the mobs who threatened liberty.²

Viewing banks as "a machine for the corruption of legislature," Jefferson did not envision the benefits that result from a diversification of earning income provided by modern banking and commerce.³ Even though all progress must come with a price, Jefferson did not seem willing to accept the growth of capitalism. He would likely view the growth of business and cities as the corruption of the United States. However, capitalism has provided jobs, higher standards of living, and better relations among foreign countries through trade, and it is clear that the growth of cities is inevitable due to the growth of population over time and the lack of land area. Jefferson's aversion to industrial society, cities, and business would make him uncomfortable in America today.

Jefferson was also limited to his time when he failed to envision the racially and socially heterogeneous society of modern America. Jefferson's views that did not allow for racial and social diversity in America, especially in regard to African-Americans, were proved unrealistic for contemporary American

society. Although Jefferson denounced slavery as "a great political and moral evil," unlike George Washington, he did not take measures to free his slaves.⁴ He felt that African-Americans could not live with whites peacefully once they were given freedom. Therefore, Jefferson was an advocate of African-American deportation. Although he was the author of the Declaration of Independence, which states that "all men are created equal," he obviously did not recognize black slaves within that category. Although racism still exists in American society, views regarding the inferior status of African-Americans are no longer acceptable. As a melting-pot nation, the United States has found that its racial diversity has contributed to its strength, whereas Jefferson would have felt that racial diversity would have weakened the nation. His vision for the future of America was centered upon one race, Caucasians. These Caucasians, capable of directing the democracy, were to be land owning gentry. America simply has not developed according to these notions.

Advocacy of rebellion to improve democracy proves to be another of Jefferson's ideals that is out of place today. He believed that "the tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants."⁵ This quote was found on the shirt of Timothy McVeigh, a suspect in the Oklahoma City bombing.⁶ Jefferson believed that the government must be held accountable for its actions and should strive solely to meet the needs of the people. If the power of the few in government spun out of control, he felt that bloodshed was an appropriate and necessary wake-up call for the unresponsive leaders. Jefferson's approval of Shays' Rebellion and the French Revolution are evidence that he did not put limits on rebellious tactics.⁷ Today's society favors compromise and deliberation over bloodshed. With the vast progress in weaponry since Jefferson's time, the number of lives that can be lost in rebellion is much greater. The Oklahoma City bombing is one example of resorting to violence in opposition to the government. Problems with the current governmental administration are ideally addressed through the proper channels, not through the barrel of a gun.

Even though some parts of Jefferson's vision have not come to pass in contemporary American society, he should be praised for his insight in some areas. He was a product of his times and it is unfair to expect him to possess extraordinary foresight in all areas. When Jefferson wrote in the Declaration of Independence that "all men are created equal," he was referring to the white, land owning, upper-classes of society, yet his intention was not bad. If that statement had not been included in a document so vital to our nation's founding, the modern perception of equality, which has expanded to include minorities and women, may not have evolved. Even without deliberate action, Jefferson's words formed the foundation upon which our present concern for civil rights rests.

Therefore, despite those cases where Jefferson appears unprophetic about contemporary society, he did make many contributions to America that make him worthy of his status as an American hero and one of the founding geniuses of our country. One of the first principles stressed by Jefferson that did stand the test of time was the idea of the separation of church and state. During Jefferson's time, his home state of Virginia was still strongly influenced by its Anglican roots. Consequently, there were laws punishing those who did not conform to the religion of the founders. Heresy was punishable by death; the denial of the Trinity led to three years of imprisonment, and church attendance was mandatory. Jefferson was appalled by these harsh punishments and found them stifling the liberty which Americans had gained through hard fought battles. In order to restore liberty to the people, Jefferson authored the Statute of Virginia for Religious Freedom, which kept the government from denying the people freedom of choice regarding religion.⁸ Believing that diversity in religious practices could only strengthen faith,

Jefferson stood by the maxim which declared that, when it came to religion, "divided we stand, united we fall."⁹ His strong stand for religious freedom remains a principle that is valued by contemporary American society. Jefferson would be pleased that Americans today have the freedom to practice the religion of their choice without penalty from the government.

The emphasis that Jefferson placed on education also remains of societal importance today. During a time when little money was being spent on schools, Jefferson founded the University of Virginia. He believed that all knowledge was useful knowledge. Even after his schooling was complete, he looked for other ways to satisfy his insatiable love for learning. Jefferson served nearly twenty years as president of the American Philosophical Society, the nation's foremost scientific organization. An avid inventor, Jefferson studied science because he believed that every scientific advance would increase human happiness.¹⁰ Since modern scientific advances have included chemical warfare and the hydrogen bomb, one could only speculate as to whether Jefferson would wish to retract that statement. Nevertheless, Jefferson's commitment to the pursuit of knowledge is an ideal that he would find fulfilled in the higher education system of our contemporary republic.

The most important ideal that Jefferson demonstrated through his governmental leadership was his optimism that reasonable human beings could determine their own future. He believed that imposition of governmental power was an obstruction of the liberty that people possessed to direct their own lives. Without a doubt, Jefferson would be upset by the number of rules and regulations currently imposed by our federal government. He would find it unthinkable that the government instructs citizens by law to wear seat belts when driving, or that our federal tax codes fill volumes. Favoring simplicity in government, Jefferson was astounded by the power and authority of the federal government and the potential majesty surrounding the presidency. It would be hard to picture him, a simple man who walked to his own inauguration, dancing at a number of inaugural balls, amidst great pomp and circumstance. Certainly he would be confused by the promises made by modern presidential candidates to solve every problem brought to them by every voter. Jefferson swore upon the altar of God "eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man."¹¹ He had faith in people's ability to use reason to overcome incompetence without unnecessary intervention from the government. This faith and trust in the common man, unmatched by Jefferson's predecessors and successors in American leadership, must continue to develop if contemporary American society is to fulfill his vision for the republic.

In summary, some of Jefferson's ideals and principles for the infant republic have been upheld in the years following his death, while others have not endured. In spite of his limitations, his vision has proved prophetic in many instances and has, without a doubt, contributed to the progress of this nation. Jefferson's legacy, the confidence in the irrepressible potential of the human spirit, will continue to direct the progress of contemporary society. Many of his words and ideas have transcended his time, embodying the hopes and dreams that Americans have for the future of their nation.

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- 1 Paul S. Boyer, *Enduring Vision* (Lexington, MA : D. C. Heath and Company, 1993) 219.
- 2 Boyer, 245.
- 3 Boyer, 218.
- 4 Lisa Grunwald, "The Enduring Vision of Thomas Jefferson," *Life* 16.6 (1993) : 43.
- 5 Conor Cruise O'Brian, "Thomas Jefferson: Radical and Racist," *Atlantic Monthly* 278.4 (1996) : 59.
- 6 O'Brian, 64.
- 7 O'Brian, 61.
- 8 Merrill D. Peterson, "Jefferson and Religious Freedom," *Atlantic Monthly* 274.6 (1994) : 116.
- 9 Peterson, "Jefferson and Religious Freedom," 119.
- 10 Boyer, 245.
- 11 Merrill D. Peterson, *The Jefferson Image in the American Mind*, (New York: Oxford Press, 1960) 443.