

THIRD  
PLACE

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## Jefferson's Republic: The Current Story

**T**he infant republic of the United States of America has slowly been growing up for just over 200 years. Its founding fathers are all gone now, but their memory lives on. In particular, Thomas Jefferson is remembered as one of the most important American fathers. Jefferson possessed a vivid image of the kind of adulthood he wished for his infant republic. The mortal nature of man ensures that Jefferson could never have survived long enough to parent his nation to adulthood, but he doubtlessly hoped to leave his baby in the hands of generations who would protect it, care for it, and nurture it to fit his ideal. It appears to me, however, that wolves somehow kidnapped the infant republic and have managed to raise it in a way that Jefferson never would have intended.

Thomas Jefferson's varied life experiences and the sheer restlessness of his mind prevented him from formulating an entirely consistent philosophy of life and politics. Therefore, it is impossible for me to assert that Jefferson would disagree with every single aspect of contemporary American society. He would, for example, be pleased to note that his Declaration of Independence still stands as he composed it. He would likely agree with our laws against employment discrimination based on religious creed, as they echo his Bill for the Establishment of Religious Freedom in Virginia (1779). Jefferson would also be proud that his University of Virginia still attracts students who wish to learn, and is still independent of any religious body. These are the three embodiments of Jefferson's principles of which he was the most proud — the three he chose to be remembered by in his epitaph — and they are all alive and seemingly well, so Jefferson could not be entirely displeased with the state of American affairs today. But a look below the surface of contemporary American society reveals a wealth of attitudes that would most certainly make Thomas Jefferson turn over in his grave.

As a college student, the first place that I notice a discrepancy between Jefferson's vision and contemporary reality is in the realm of education. America's present policy that a full education is a right of every child digresses from Jefferson's opinion on the matter. Jefferson embraced a policy of selective education, deeming it necessary to educate all children, rich or poor, provided that they show promise for learning and hence benefiting society at large. Along with this desire to educate went the provision of scholarships, which might at first glance appear to be need-based (in the case of the poor people), but which in Jefferson's eyes were merit-based. Jefferson's Virginia Bill for the general diffusion of knowledge provided for free public elementary education for all non-slave boys and girls, followed by scholarships to grammar schools for the more deserving of the boys, and then more scholarships to William and Mary for the most promising of these young men. While Jefferson advocated the public tax-supported higher education of "those persons, whom nature hath endowed with genius and virtue" only, we attempt to offer all students an opportunity for higher education regardless of prior academic performance. Federal

loans, Pell grants, and the totally need-based endowments so popular at colleges and universities today represent a turn away from Jeffersonian education. Jefferson would also likely be shocked at the continuing education of women — females with Ph.D.'s, co-ed institutions, etc. — and, I imagine, would be absolutely appalled by the recent events at the Citadel! Education, in Jefferson's mind, was a means for "illuminating ... the minds of the people at large," which would achieve the sociopolitical end of guarding the republic against tyranny. To him education was not, as American society views it today, a right or a requirement to be offered indiscriminately.

Along with selective education, tolerance of religion was one of Jefferson's suggestions for keeping the republic alive. Jefferson was a deist, believing that a Creator had been present in the beginning, but that all destiny now lay in the hands of man. Jefferson advocated total religious freedom in the name of abolishing "every kind of tyranny over the mind of man." An established official church was a means of control, and therefore not permissible in a republic. And a religious body overseeing an institution of education? Absolutely unthinkable in Jefferson's mind! Furman, Bob Jones University, Brigham Young, and yes, even Elon College would be on Jefferson's "hit list" were he alive today. In fact, Jefferson founded the University of Virginia as an institution freed from religious affiliation. Apparently, Jefferson defended the separation of church and state. Although America still adheres to this general policy in government, the presence of any of these religiously affiliated educational institutions would gall Jefferson — they are the antithesis of his University. To him, we are stepping backwards by letting education and religion remain entangled.

Speaking of entanglements, America has turned its back on Jefferson's chosen foreign policy. Our current tendency to get involved in other countries' affairs opposes Jefferson's vision for his republic. Jefferson was outspoken in his advice to avoid all entangling alliances, presumably because guarding the interests of other nations seldom resulted in furthering the good of the American people, the ultimate goal of the republic. In contrast, America has allied itself with countries as varied as Russia, Germany, South Vietnam, Korea, and Bosnia. Furthermore, America has strayed from Jefferson's vision by taking nearly every opportunity to engage in conflict with other nations. In Jefferson's words, "Never was so much false arithmetic employed on any subject as that which has been employed to persuade nations that it is their interest to go to war" (Notes on Virginia). Contemporary America has delved into other nations' business far too frequently to merit Jefferson's approval. Jefferson's first inaugural speech included his creed of "peace, commerce, and honest friendship with all nations, entangling alliances with none." This Jeffersonian ideal has gone to pot, as America seems to be the first to contemplate war, embargo, and skepticism in foreign relations, and the first to get involved in questionable alliances. I imagine that Jefferson would take one look at his "republic's" state of international affairs and say, "I told you so." Rarely has the condition of America's people been ameliorated through its invasive foreign policy.

Jefferson would likely disagree with the majority of our internal economic policy. America is known worldwide as a center of big business. Industry has overtaken the agrarian society of Jefferson's dreams. Jefferson executed the Louisiana Purchase partly to expand the republic's government and territory. With all the new land, people would have more room to spread out and get down to agrarian business. However, from the looks of today's U.S. maps, nobody wanted to go west; the majority of America's population is still concentrated east of the Appalachians. Even where people live in the West, population is centered around a few large metropolises, an outcome which would frustrate Jefferson to no end! It is true that Charlottesville, Virginia, being Jefferson's hometown, still attempts to drive industry

and urbanity away, since Jefferson wouldn't have wanted it. However, most other regions of America aren't so conscience-stricken, and the resulting crowded cities are not what Jefferson intended. America's trend of allowing free immigration further grates against Jefferson's ideal. The principles of foreign governments, Jefferson stated, would infiltrate America through immigrants and soil the pure republican government. Not only does America boast an industrial economy relying on large numbers of immigrants for labor, but it also includes a national bank chartered by the Federal Government, another one of Jefferson's pet peeves. A national bank would put too much power in the hands of the government, Jefferson believed, drawing it away from a republic. The current American economy is clearly not a fulfillment of Jefferson's dreams, either.

America's government would likely attract Jefferson's interest before anything else. Unfortunately for Jefferson, however, he would find that the contemporary government does not fit his image of the ideal republic. A champion of states' rights and distribution of power all the way down to the individual citizen, Jefferson would likely call our government too centralized. Washington, he would say, has too much power, and he would remember the statement in his autobiography: "Were we directed from Washington when to sow and when to reap, we should soon want bread." Jefferson would find America bread-hungry in light of the inefficiency of many of our recent governments, Republican and Democratic alike. The endless debating, the recurrent political scandals (Whitewater, the Anita Hill case, the Iran-Contra affair), and the habit of political leaders to renege on their promises once elected all point to the inefficiency of a government as centralized as America's. According to Jefferson's first inaugural address, a "wise and frugal government, which shall restrain men from injuring one another," was a cornerstone of the republican creed. The wisdom and frugality of our current government are both debatable; my guess is that our attempt is not exactly what Jefferson had envisioned. Apparently, the current trend in government is to wrest power away from the "everyman" of society. Jefferson believed that the people knew their own interests and could be trusted; the very purpose of education was to implant knowledge into the common mind so that tyranny would not be able to sneak in and grab a foothold. I do not see the current government as placing a lot of trust in the hands of the people. As one example, HMO's have been established because we apparently are not capable of deciding the best for our own health care! Here, the government seems to doubt that the natural survival instinct is possessed by every human, that we are incapable of choosing the care that will keep us alive. I do not think that Thomas Jefferson would appreciate being told when he could visit a doctor and whom he could see. According to Jefferson, no man was indispensable, and the government of the republic should never allow any man to consider himself such. All too often in contemporary America, individual citizens feel led blindly around as if on a trust walk — but there is no trust in either direction between the people and the government. Jefferson would no doubt consider this sentiment a shame, since he believed that the underlying purpose of the government should be to ameliorate the condition of the people. Jefferson believed strongly that power corrupts, and the corruption of recent leaders by power shows that the Jeffersonian ideal is visibly dying in Washington also.

A final area in which Jefferson's dream has turned into Jefferson's nightmare is American entertainment. In all of his endeavors, Jefferson sought to learn. His hunger for information drew him to books: not novels, but non-fiction tomes. Americans today are tempted with TV, movies, and radio, but these media are not necessarily anti-Jeffersonian. What Jefferson would be disappointed with is the sheer volume of entertainment having no educational value whatsoever, and the fact that the majority of Americans are obsessed with these opportunities to the exclusion of educational opportunities. If

Jefferson walked into a college dorm on a Saturday and watched a student sleep till noon, get up and watch cartoons for four hours, and then go out drinking until 3 A.M., he would be shocked. Jefferson believed in educational entertainment, a concept alien to much of contemporary American society, especially to younger members.

I do not believe that Thomas Jefferson would view contemporary American society as a fulfillment of his vision for the infant republic. Jefferson was an optimist, though, and I doubt he would perceive contemporary society as the end. He would say that America is still growing up; look to the future; and hope that today is but a stage of adolescent rebellion and that his infant republic will one day mature as he would have wanted it.