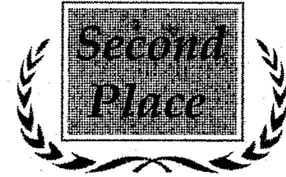

Thomas Jefferson: Minister of Enlightenment

By Daniel T. Callaway

Thomas Jefferson entered the College of William and Mary when he was not quite seventeen years old. His experience there transformed him. Jefferson would later write in his autobiography, "It was my great good fortune, and what probably fixed the destinies of my life, that Dr. William Small was then professor of mathematics…He…became soon attached to me…and from his conversation I got my first views of the expansion of science and of the system of things in which we are placed" (Cunningham 5). The science and the system Jefferson explored with Dr. Small would be his first exposure to the world of the Enlightenment; he would be one of Reason's most determined followers for the rest of his life.

Jefferson embodied Enlightenment ideals in practice as well as preachment, politically as well as personally. The spirit of the United States was birthed from these ideals, and Jefferson's devotion to the freedom to think and choose affects us deeply over two centuries later. In his book, *The Enlightenment in France,* Frederick Artz writes that today we are the spiritual children of the Eighteenth Century (Artz 35). What that generation saw as a new, radical set of ideas, this generation holds as platitudes.

The Enlightenment turned the existing world view on its head. Human nature moved from the realm of weakness and sinfulness to inherent goodness when guided by reason, and minds began to focus on the physical world in which they lived. This life could be enjoyed and developed, even controlled, as well as the one beyond it (Artz 30). By 1750, the enlightenment ideas were spreading; European writings and manners traveled to the United States. The pursuit of happiness as a right began to take root. The Philosophes, the early Enlightenment thinkers in France such as Montesquieu, Voltaire, and Diderot, set down some early principles of the movement: the only justification for the state is the promotion of the good life for its citizens; men should be rational, should be allowed to direct their lives by knowledge, reason and experience; the ability to use reason makes men equal; and with the use of reason, progress is sure to come (Artz 33). Institutions were now scrutinized on the basis of utility rather than antiquity.

Antiquity certainly was not on the United States' side in the Eighteenth Century, but Jefferson saw America's great achievement in political and intellectual freedom as far exceeding any European political feat (Malone 93). However, the seeds of enlightenment planted in Jefferson's soul had European roots. England's Revolution in 1688 brought on the works of Locke and Bolingbroke, and reason in government as opposed to common law came to the fore.

The idea that there is natural law protecting the inalienable rights of the people began to evolve. Jefferson began to use the ideas of the Philosophes to defend self-rule and denounce Parliament's interference with the American colonies. According to Lawrence Kaplan, Jefferson developed his ideology from his own experience, an affinity for the British tradition of individual rights as well as the teachings of the Enlightenment thinkers (4,5). In 1774, he published the "summary View" which expressed his political philosophy; Jefferson distilled Enlightenment ideas into a version colored by his environment, heritage, and goals. He was as much a developer of the Enlightenment as its student.

Citing that both French and English writers held natural law supreme, Jefferson claimed that Parliament violated this law. Two years later, the "Summary View" was transformed into The Declaration of Independence. The Document itself could serve as a definition of Enlightenment tenets. "All men are created equal (and) are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights...Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness." Jefferson harmonized with the Philosophes' as well as Locke's view of governments, that they "derive their powers from the consent of the governed." The people have the right to choose the government that will create safety and happiness. The Declaration's entire philosophy puts faith in the human ability to reason. It trusts that the people are capable of deciding what only despots had decided until then.

Jefferson put his faith in the electorate; he once scribbled in the margin of a book by Montesquieu, "By their votes the people exercise their sovereignty" (Kaplan 4). This would prove to be a point of contention between Jefferson and his colleague Alexander Hamilton. Jefferson's devotion to enlightenment values stands in stark contrast to Hamilton's suspicion of them. According to Dumas Malone, "no other American political figure has personified national power and the rule of the favored few so well as Hamilton" (286). During a meeting at Jefferson's house, Hamilton saw Jefferson's portraits of Sir Francis Bacon, Sir Isaac Newton, and John Locke, and he asked Jefferson who these men were. They were his "trinity of the three greatest men the world had ever produced," he replied, but they meant nothing to Hamilton who responded, "the greatest man that ever lived was Julius Caesar" (Malone 287). Jefferson dealt with a good deal of resentment from and competition with Hamilton. Fourteen years his junior and of lower political rank, Hamilton surpassed him in influence (Kaplan 38). Hamilton's successes and Federalist views that were hostile to Jefferson's vision of America's best interests spurred the creation of an opposition party, the Republicans. Jefferson wooed Southern farmers and citizens fascinated by the French Revolution to this camp and began to build a presence against Hamilton's anti-enlightenment agenda. The Federalists wished to keep a tight cap on the electorate. Jefferson and the Republicans wished to extend it. He emphasized the importance of general education and keeping the people informed: "The basis of our government being the opinion of the people, the very first object should be to keep that right...that every man should be capable of reading (the newspaper)" (Malone 158).

Jefferson exhibited the Enlightenment influence in his personal life as well. He had incredible zeal for both agriculture and architecture. Both studies were useful, and he approached both of them as a scientist. He esteemed his predecessor, Benjamin Franklin, because he always directed his science toward use in his private life (Malone 83). This echoes the enlightenment's insistence that institutions and practices be evaluated according to their utility.

Architecture as an art form is closely akin to utility. It also opens a paradoxical window on Jefferson's mind. He looked forward to the glorious promise of a Republican government and backward to the architectural marvels of antiquity (Malone 89). However, the order and scientific precision inherent in this design reflect a rational, mathematical approach. He wished to cut away extravagances, attain simplicity. He adapted old things to modern use, and his work in architecture led him to develop other instruments and devices. At his home, Monticello, French doors opened simultaneously from cables in the floor, a telescope allowed him to view the construction at his University, and a dual-pen device copied whatever Jefferson wrote to another piece of paper. His Virginia home was a small city on a hill, a self-sufficient community thanks to Jefferson's thoughtful creation of useful things.

Jefferson approached religion in a thoughtful way as well. He believed firmly in the freedom of religion which was one and the same as freedom of thought, but he departed from most of the Philosophes in that he was not an atheist (Malone 110). He regarded his religious views as wholly private. Essentially a deist, he saw the presence of sectarian views as a healthy state for a country because it meant that there was freedom of thought. Freedom of the mind, to Jefferson, was the foundation for human beings to progress to happiness. He wrote in 1799, "To preserve the freedom of the human mind then and freedom of the press, every spirit should be ready to devote itself to martyrdom" (Koch 181, 182). Freedom was a God-given right, and to Jefferson, using that freedom was worship: "I never told my religion, nor scrutinized that of another. I never attempted to make a convert, nor wished to change another's creed…it is in our lives, and not from our words, that our religion must be read" (Kaminski 106).

Jefferson embodied many qualities of the movement that history decided to call the Enlightenment. However, when we look beyond the terms—natural law, unalienable rights, reason—we see that all of Jefferson's work and thought depends upon a foundation of freedom. Jefferson and the Enlightenment affect our perceptions deeply today. Artz writes that we still believe that man and his institutions can change, that social and political problems can be remedied rather than endured, that the goal of human life is self-realization here below, and that the future is an opportunity (35). We look ahead. America's material wealth, diplomatic influence, and cultural diversity are all traits inherited from the Enlightenment. However, "the pursuit of happiness" does not happen without the freedom to pursue it. Just as we forget that the Enlightenment ideals of free thought were once radical, we also forget the weight of the freedoms Jefferson helped this nation secure. Jefferson said, "It now rests with ourselves alone to enjoy in peace and concord the blessings of self-government, so long denied to mankind."[1]

Realizing that the "blessings of self-government" are still denied to the Afghan woman who wants to learn to read, the Serbian boy who wishes for a safe home, the Chinese man who cannot express his faith in a public place, the blessing and necessity of our own freedom becomes soberly clear.

Works Cited

Artz, Frederick. B. *The Enlightenment in France.* The Kent State University Press, Kent,1968

Cunningham, Noble E. *In Pursuit of Reason: The Life of Thomas Jefferson.* Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge, 1987

Jefferson, Thomas. *The Declaration of Independence.* 1776. *National Archives and Records Administration.* Online. 12 April, 2000

Kaminski, John P. ed. *Citizen Jefferson: The Wit and Wisdom of an American Sage.* Madison House, Madison, 1994.

Kaplan, Lawrence S. *Jefferson and France: An Essay on Politics and Political Ideas.* Yale University Press: New Haven, London, 1967.

Koch, Adrienne. *Jefferson and Madison: The Great Collaboration.* Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. New York, 1950.

Malone, Dumas. *Jefferson and the Rights of Man.* Little, Brown and Company: Boston, 1951.

---

[1] Quote is found at the front of the Cunningham book, no page number.