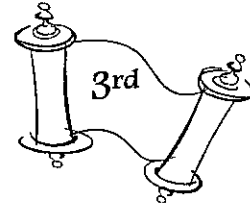


Jefferson and Race: American Ideals and American Reality

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When Thomas Jefferson wrote the Declaration of Independence, he was doing more than justifying American independence by invoking Enlightenment ideals. Jefferson was also postulating what today seems commonplace but at the time was a novel and radical proposition—that it is possible to have a government founded not on the power it exerts over its citizens but the principles and ideals it upholds. These principles and ideals, most fundamentally that “all men are created equal” and that man has been given by God the “unalienable” rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, have been shown by history to represent a lasting revolution in political thought. However, they have also proven problematic for many generations of Americans, as they have viewed first-hand the contrast between the perfect ideals Jefferson inscribed in the Declaration and the all too imperfect reality of human existence. No issue illuminated this discrepancy more than American slavery, and the slavery issue, in turn, hinged on Americans’ views on race—a matter that was discussed and debated extensively during the ante-bellum period and one that profoundly affected two predominate issues of the Jeffersonian Era: slavery itself and Westward expansion.

Americans’ views of race during this period were a function of complicated and interrelated forces, including history, religion, culture, and personal experience; thus there existed in America a discernable spectrum of thought concerning it. Many Americans believed in unqualified, inherent racial equality. Abolitionist publications such as William Lloyd Garrison’s, *The Liberator*, advocated “immediate emancipation without expatriation,” believing America could quickly become a multiracial society of equality.¹ Similarly, President Adam’s secretary of state, James McHenry, after reading an almanac authored by free black Benjamin Banneker, commented that Banneker’s work was “fresh proof that the powers of the mind are disconnected with the color of the skin, or, in other words, a striking contradiction to [the idea] that the Negroes are naturally inferior.”²

At the opposing end of this spectrum was a belief of innate black inferiority, the view, as Southern leader John Calhoun stated, that blacks and whites are “distinguished by color, and other physical differences, as well as intellectual.”³ Echoing this sentiment and the idea of black inferiority based on their tacit consent to slavery, George S. Sawyer in *Southern Institutes* stated, “The social, moral and political history of the negro race bears strong testimony against them; it furnishes the most undeniable proof of their mental inferiority.”⁴

¹Oates, Stephen B., *The Approaching Fury: Voices of the Storm. 1820-1861*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1998, 77.

²Franklin, John Hope, and Alfred A. Moss, Jr. *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African Americans*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000, 108.

³Oates, Stephen B., *The Approaching Fury: Voices of the Storm. 1820-1861*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1998, 48.

⁴Franklin, John Hope, and Alfred A. Moss, Jr. *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African Americans*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000, 212.

This simplistic dichotomy, however, can be misleading: most Americans' views resided uneasily in the middle. And no one person manifested America's conflicted—even tormented—struggle with race more than Thomas Jefferson. The Declaration of Independence, which he intended to be an “expression of the American mind,” was written by Jefferson as an affirmation of rights for all of humanity: as he stated in an 1807 letter, “I sincerely pray with you, my friends, that all the members of the human family may...find themselves securely established in the enjoyments of life, liberty, & happiness.”⁵ His belief in fundamental human rights caused Jefferson to refer to blacks as “our suffering brethren,” and to despise slavery as an “abomination [that] must have an end, and there is a superior bench reserved in heaven for those who hasten it.”⁶

Despite these lofty proclamations, however, Jefferson is also known to have harbored his own racist “suspicion” of the African race: “Their inferiority is not the effect merely of their condition of life... It is not their condition... but nature, which has produced this distinction.”⁷ Jefferson believed in the fundamental humanity of all races, while also believing there to be real differences among them. Possibly Jefferson's most candid and revealing insight into his own conflicted thinking on race occurred in his 1814 letter to Edward Coles:

Be assured that 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 [the African race] by nature, and to find that in this respect they are on a par with ourselves. My doubts were the result of personal observation on the limited sphere of my own State, where the opportunities for the development of their genius were not favorable, and those of exercising it still less so.⁸

It is clear that this complex and conflicted view of race, personified by Jefferson but held by many Americans, played a large role in shaping American policy on the predominant issues of the time: slavery and expansion.

These ideas of race, the foundation of the slavery debate, dramatically manifested themselves at the Philadelphia Constitutional Convention of 1787. James Madison averred that the “specter of slavery haunted the convention.”⁹ When the convention turned specifically to the issue whether slaves would be included in population counts determining congressional representation, it quickly became apparent to Alexander Hamilton that “no union could possibly [be] formed” without a compromise which would inevitably compromise American ideals.¹⁰ The resulting “federal ratio,” known to history as the Three-Fifths Compromise, dictated that a slave would be counted as three fifths of a person for census purposes. In making this concession the Constitution was straying from the philosophical ideals upon which the nation was founded, and many delegates, including Maryland's Martin Luther, recognized this hypocrisy. Luther refused to sign the Constitution because, as he saw it, the

⁵ McCullough, David. *John Adams*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001, 121. and Kaminski, John P., ed. *The Quotable Jefferson*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006, 375.

⁶ Kaminski, John P., ed. *The Quotable Jefferson*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006, 374-375.

⁷ McCullough, David. *John Adams*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001, 331.

⁸ Kaminski, John P., ed. *The Quotable Jefferson*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006, 376.

⁹ Chernow, Ron. *Alexander Hamilton*. New York: The Penguin Press, 2004, 238.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 239.

Three-Fifths Compromise could not fail to “render us contemptible to every true friend of liberty in the world.”¹¹

Four out of the first five presidents of this newly formed constitutional democracy, including Jefferson, were slaveholders from Virginia—a state referred to as “the capital of the American paradox.”¹² All of these men, in their own way, saw slavery as problematic, but took no meaningful steps to end it; they were content to defer the problem to posterity. As Jefferson put it, emancipation was an “enterprise for the young.”¹³ Their ultimate complacency with the status quo, likely influenced by their views on race, helped shape the slavery debate, which was quickly evolving into an issue of the expansion of slavery into newly acquired American territories.

With Jefferson’s Louisiana Purchase of 1803, the size of the United States roughly doubled and ideas of expansionism began to infiltrate the American consciousness. Practical developments, such as the improvement of the nation’s transportation system and the invention of the cotton gin, gave impetus to the expansion of slavery. But in addition to these practical causes there were also more philosophical ones. Although the term “manifest destiny” was not coined until 1845, its essence was the foundation of the expansionist paradigm. America had a right and duty, as John O’Sullivan proclaimed, to “overspread and to possess the whole of the continent which Providence has given us for the development of the great experiment of liberty.”¹⁴ This line of thought, coupled with rhetoric of civilizing “lesser breeds without the law [the American Indians],” evinced a discernable air of perceived superiority on the part of white America.¹⁵

As slave states continued to enter the union as a result of westward expansion, Northerners worried their “empire of liberty” was growing into an empire of repression. When Missouri applied for statehood in early 1819, Northerners vehemently opposed its admission, claiming it would upset the delicate balance of power in Congress between free and slave states. Congressional leaders, such as the “Great Compromiser” Henry Clay, concluded that striking a deal with the South was the only viable way to preserve the union. The fruit of this notion, the quid pro quo solution known as the The Missouri Compromise, offered no meaningful answers to the fundamental, underlying conflict. An elderly Jefferson recognized from Monticello that the slavery issue would not die out on its own, that the issue would increasingly invoke the “angry passions of men,” and that armed conflict may inevitably decide the fate of the union: “This momentous question, like a fire-bell in the night, awakened and filled me with terror. I considered it at once the knell of the union.”¹⁶

¹¹ Nash, Gary B. *The Forgotten Fifth: African Americans in the Age of Revolution*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006, 77.

¹² Wiencek, Henry. *An Imperfect God: George Washington, His Slaves, and the Creation of America*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003, 134.

¹³ McCullough, David. *John Adams*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001, 633.

¹⁴ Murrin, John M., Johnson, McPherson, Gerstle, Rosenberg, and Rosenberg. *Liberty, Equality, Power: A History of the American People*. Vol. I: To 1877. Belmont, CA: Thomson Wadsworth, 2006, 486.

¹⁵ Van Deusen, Glyndon G. *The Jacksonian Era*. New York: Harper & Row, 1959, 171.

¹⁶ Murrin, John M., Johnson, McPherson, Gerstle, Rosenberg, and Rosenberg. *Liberty, Equality, Power: A History of the American People*. Vol. I: To 1877. Belmont, CA: Thomson Wadsworth, 2006, 452.

Jefferson came to see the issue in apocalyptic terms:

Can the liberties of a nation be thought secure when we have removed their only firm basis, a conviction in the minds of the people that these liberties are of the gift of god? That they are not to be violated but with his wrath? Indeed I tremble for my country when I reflect that god is just; that his justice cannot sleep forever.¹⁷

Jefferson's words proved prescient. However, thanks largely to Lincoln's conceptualizing of the Civil War as a battle over founding ideals, and in particular his echoing of Jefferson's stirring language of human equality, when this apocalypse finally came, so too did come a rebirth and invocation of our founding ideals, forever ending American slavery. So deep-seeded were our conflicting ideas about race, however, that even the war could not definitively resolve this conflict in favor of these ideals.

¹⁷ Kaminski, John P., ed. *The Quotable Jefferson*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006, 373.

Annotated Bibliography

Chernow, Ron. *Alexander Hamilton*. New York: The Penguin Press, 2004.

This biography, when taken in concert with *John Adams*, presents us with a strikingly complete view of America's founding fathers, their views on the predominant issues of their time, as well as their justification for these views. It is used here, specifically, to gain insight into the Founders' thinking regarding the formation of the Constitution, including the infamous Three-Fifths Compromise.

Franklin, John Hope, and Alfred A. Moss, Jr. *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African Americans*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000.

In what is a fairly comprehensive history of the African Americans, the authors discuss, among a plethora of other topics, the American dialogue over the legitimacy of slavery and the meaning of race. The authors attribute the spread of slavery, in part, to the thinking that fostered its rationalization, including "manifest destiny," white superiority, and paternalism.

Kaminski, John P., ed. *The Quotable Jefferson*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006.

This wide-ranging compilation of Jefferson quotations is impressive for both its substance and scope. It presents us with a penetrating, largely unfiltered depiction of the preeminent American philosopher, whose writing was the foundation of a nation. Particularly useful is the section in which Jefferson reflects on the injustice of slavery, as this collection lends proof that Jefferson, thought to be the embodiment of America's collective thinking, was profoundly conflicted when it came to the issues of race, equality, and slavery— issues he believed were the "knell" of the union.

McCullough, David. *John Adams*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001.

David McCullough, one of the most respected historians of our generation, offers, in this Pulitzer Prize winning biography, not just a narrative on the life of John Adams, but also an intimate portrayal of those with whom he founded a nation; not just a chronology of events, but a description of thoughts and ideals which filled the "hearts and minds" of the revolutionary generation, including, of course, the meaning of race.

Murrin, John M., Johnson, McPherson, Gerstle, Rosenberg, and Rosenberg. *Liberty, Equality, Power: A History of the American People*. Vol. I: To 1877. Belmont, CA: Thomson Wadsworth, 2006.

This source depicts early American history from the perspective of the Americans who were responsible for shaping it. Its focuses on "the extraordinary and transformative impact that the ideas of liberty and equality exerted on American politics, society, and economics during the American Revolution and after." The authors successfully integrate the facts and events of early American history with the ideas which where their impetus, naturally lending key insights into the shaping of American policy by American thought.

Nash, Gary B. *The Forgotten Fifth: African Americans in the Age of Revolution*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006.

Based on a 2004 lecture at Harvard University, this short but poignant book presents the Civil War as the result of specific actions and flawed ideologies that could have been avoided by the founding fathers. The book is particularly insightful as it effectively portrays the link between “the cause of the colonies and the cause of the Negroes bound in chattel slavery” as “inescapable.” In other words, they are both manifestations of the same ideals.

Oates, Stephen B., *The Approaching Fury: Voices of the Storm. 1820-1861*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1998.

This book tells of the approach of the Civil War from the perspective of key national proponents and opponents of slavery during the ante-bellum period. Its unique and provocative first person perspective works as a narrative device, conveying these opinion-shapers' views in a clear and seemingly accurate way.

Van Deusen, Glyndon G. *The Jacksonian Era*. New York: Harper & Row, 1959.

The Jacksonian Era overlaps substantially with the Jeffersonian Era in both their historical dates and their similar “individual”-based ideologies. The Jacksonian Era describes this period, including expansion of a people and their beliefs into the American territories.

Wiencek, Henry. *An Imperfect God: George Washington, His Slaves, and the Creation of America*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003.

Washington, like Jefferson, was a slave-owner from Virginia who believed slavery to be morally wrong yet, as a personal matter, embraced slavery and exploited slave labor to facilitate his upper-class Southern lifestyle. This conflicting duality of thought, referred to as the “American paradox,” is an essential concept for one who wishes to truly understand the history of race and slavery in ante-bellum America.