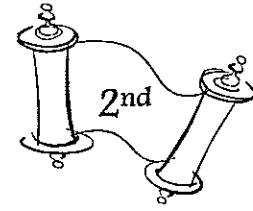


*Holding the Wolf by the Ears:
the negotiated balance between justice
and national preservation*

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The apotheosis of Thomas Jefferson is problematic in that it invites us to abandon our critical approach to history and champion Jefferson as an idea, an immortalized figment of our civic religion rather than Jefferson as a man whose beliefs were constrained by political realities and the limits of his own flawed humanity. Jefferson was a highly enigmatic figure whose character should not be reduced to a patriotic apologia, as in doing so we fail to recognize this complexity. While Jefferson was a key theorist in many areas of political and social ideology, the issue most clearly demonstrating the complexities both of the man and the age in which he lived is the question of race in Jeffersonian America (1770-1840). Given America's Revolutionary values of egalitarianism and equality of opportunity, were slaves and freedmen to be included within the scope of the concept of American freedom and social identity, or were they to be left without? In answers that reflect the political and social realities of the times, Jefferson denied the promise of political and social inclusion to those brought to America's shores in bondage. At every juncture, the Founding Fathers allowed the injustice of slavery to continue because the unity of the republic was the overriding priority.

Born into Virginia's planter aristocracy Jefferson inherited a political, economic, and social system already stained by slavery, America's "haunting original sin" (Boulton, 467). With slavery firmly entrenched in society, the path toward absolution was obscured by racial prejudices, sectionalism, and political and social realities. Unlike the Indians who he approached as a civilization to be socialized by white culture, Jefferson wondered if blacks were capable of enlightenment, suggesting a racial inferiority. Not willing to take a firm stance one way or the other, Jefferson ambiguously writes in *Notes on the State of Virginia* "I advance it, therefore, as a suspicion only that the blacks, whether originally a distinct race, or made distinct by time and circumstances, are inferior to whites in the endowments both of body and mind" (Cohen, 514). More telling of his personal prejudices, however, is Jefferson's "refusal to accept an environmentalist explanation for the apparent inferiority of the blacks" (Cohen, 505). While Jefferson's Indian policy was based entirely on the fact that "time and circumstance" could be overcome by Native Americans, Jefferson would not make the same allowance for blacks (Cohen, 505). Though Jefferson would not give public voice to this opinion, he held that blacks were, as a race, inherently inferior to whites (Cohen, 505). While perhaps racially distinct, Jefferson nonetheless believed that the philosophies of "single creation and...a universe governed by natural law" dictated "that the concept of human rights applied to Negroes by virtue of the fact that they were human beings too," and this belief shaped his views on the institution of slavery (Cohen, 505).

Slavery is the paradox that has perplexed generations of Jefferson scholars, for while Jefferson's most notable contribution to the American system is a statement declaring all men equal, by 1822 Jefferson held 267 of his fellow human beings in bondage (Cohen, 506). Despite the fact that he himself owned slaves, his public statements consistently condemned slavery as a moral wrong, writing in 1821, "nothing is more certainly written in the book of

fate than that these people are to be free” (Cohen, 523). In 1814 Jefferson wrote that “the love of justice and the love of country plead equally the cause of the people [slaves], and it is a moral reproach to us that they should have pleaded it so long in vain,” and declared the existence of slavery to be a “condition of moral and political reprobation” (Cohen, 504). Slavery, an institution of “avarice and oppression,” was clearly anathema to Jefferson’s republican ideals (Cohen, 503).

Jefferson’s first action against slavery came in 1776 where he sought to include a provision banning the slave trade in Virginia’s Constitution, reading, “No person hereafter coming into this country [Virginia] shall be held in slavery under any pretext whatever” (Cohen, 507). This measure was defeated, it simply was not a political reality. Among the grievances listed in the Declaration of Independence Jefferson listed that in bringing slavery to the American continent the British had “waged cruel war on human nature itself, violating the most sacred rights of life and liberty. . . . Determined to keep open a market where MEN should be bought and sold, [George III] has prostituted his negative for suppressing every legislative attempt to prohibit or to restrain this execrable commerce” (Cohen, 507). While these episodes demonstrate his hatred for the institution of slavery, other statements demonstrate his own prejudices.

In all of Jefferson’s millennial dreams of America’s bright future, he never saw racial integration as a possibility, and believed that “Negroes were members of a race so alien and inferior that there was no hope that whites and blacks could coexist side by side in terms of equality” (Cohen, 514). Five years before his death Jefferson wrote “Nothing is more certainly written in the book of fate than that these people are to be free, Nor is it less certain that the two races, equally free cannot live in the same government” (Cohen, 523). Therefore the argument was far more complex than a simple question of the morality of slavery, it was a question of what would happen once the slaves were free. To this problem there were no easy solutions. Slavery was, after all, “an essential tool of separation and control” widely believed to be “the only barrier to unbridled racial mixture or racial violence” (Feller, 62). As Americans feared “race riot and sexual chaos” in a post-slavery America, “Jefferson’s painfully accurate prophecy that free blacks could not live harmoniously in America for centuries, made him and others tie American emancipation to African colonization” (Freehling, 83). Complicating the matter, however, was the fact that Jefferson believed that within one generation the number of blacks in the United States could reach six million, the deportation of which would neither be “practicable for us, or expedient for them” (Cohen, 523). In addition to the high costs of repatriation elsewhere, emancipation would be tied to reparations for slaveholders, which he calculated “would amount to six hundred millions of dollars which must be paid or lost by somebody” (Cohen, 524). As the answer to slavery seemed almost as troublesome as the institution itself, it is no surprise that after 1784 Jefferson abandoned “the expectation of any early provision for the extinguishment of slavery among us” (Cohen, 522).

Sectionalism and expansion also militated against any easy solution to the question of slavery. Jefferson had doubled the size of the United States, and in doing so provided the catalyst for the issues of sectionalism and the expansion of slavery. As northern abolitionists sought to stop slavery’s expansion on grounds of morality, southern reactionaries would not accept interference with the institution upon which their political, social, and economic systems were predicated (Feller, 62). In the Ordinance of 1784, which dictated policy for the western territories, Jefferson included a prohibition on slavery throughout the West both North and South to become effective in 1800 (Cohen, 510). The Ordinance did not pass, and this defeat “marked Jefferson’s last public attempt to limit or end slavery” (Cohen, 511). In 1819 Missouri sought entrance to the Union, and became the center of the debate between sectional

forces over slavery, with the issue of expansion serving as a catalyst. New York Congressman James Tallmadge, Jr. spoke for the North as he proposed that Missouri's admission be granted on the condition of emancipation (Feller, 62). With Tallmadge's proposal blocked by southern pro-slavery forces in the Senate, the controversy continued, as "Northern meetings and petitions demanded a halt to slavery's spread, while southerners warned of disunion if Congress dared intrude on Missourians' right to determine their own institutions" (Feller, 62). As the forces of slavery, sectionalism, and expansion were threatening to rend the nation, Jefferson's frustrations are clear, calling the Missouri crisis a "fire bell in the night" and writing of American slavery "We have the wolf by the ears and can neither hold him nor safely let him go. Justice is in the one scale, and self-preservation in the other" (Cohen, 523). Union outweighed justice, and just as moral questions over the issue of slavery were stymied in the Continental Congress in the name of Union, so it would continue to be (Freehling, 84). In the Missouri Compromise the admittance of slaveholding Missouri was counterbalanced with free Maine, and slavery was banned north of 36°30' north latitude line (Feller, 62). The crisis was contained, but such compromises solved only the symptoms, and not the underlying causes. America was still holding the wolf. With southerners threatening secession Jefferson clearly saw the dire consequences of these powerful forces, writing in 1820, "I regret that I am now to die in the belief that the useless sacrifice of themselves by the generation of 1776, to acquire self-government and happiness in their country, is to be thrown away by the unwise and unworthy passions of their sons" (Freehling, 93).

Reflecting Jefferson's wolf analogy, Jean Yarborough writes that the persistence of American slavery is explained by "the tendency...for justice to be reduced to self-preservation, and for self-preservation to be defined as self-interest, and self-interest to be defined as what is convenient and achievable" (Yarborough, 96). What is 'convenient and achievable' is clearly demonstrated in the actions the Founding Fathers took against slavery, shown first in Jefferson's petition to Congress in 1806 to halt the slave trade, writing to Congress: "I congratulate you, fellow citizens, on the approach of the period when you may interpose your authority constitutionally" to halt the "violations of human rights which have been so long continued on the unoffending inhabitants of Africa (Freehling, 88). Congress was able to pass the ban, which ended legalized trade in 1808 (Freehling, 88). Interestingly, the end of the slave trade served to "help push bondage deeper into the South...Now that African markets were closed the new Southwest has to procure its slaves from Northern slave states" dramatically reducing the numbers of slaves in the North and what would become the border states (Freehling, 89). As slavery was now concentrated in the Deep South, "Jefferson and his contemporaries...willed to posterity a crippled, restricted, peculiar institution. Attacking slavery where it was weakest they swept it out of the North and kept it away from the Northwest" (Freehling, 91). In these actions, Jefferson was constrained by the social and political realities of his times, working for practicable solutions while at the same time preserving the unity of the republic. Writes William Freehling, "Both [Jefferson's] antislavery beliefs and his fear of the consequences of these beliefs [miscegenation/race war] went too deep. He was caught up too completely in America's most anguishing dilemma" (Freehling, 93). On the day on which Jefferson died, July 4th, 1826, Americans were celebrating the triumphant past of America and looking towards a prosperous future (Feller, 4). With the powerful issues of sectionalism, expansion, and the moral debate over slavery remaining unresolved, however, hopes for the future would be matched with concerns for the tumultuous present (Feller, xii).

Thomas Jefferson is described by A. Whitney Griswold as "a conductor for all the intellectual currents of his age" (665). This characterization is an appropriate one, as through this lens we see that Jefferson's tortured thinking about race is clearly representative of the

complexities of his age. While looking for practicable and socially acceptable solutions, Jefferson was constrained by the times in which he lived. Westward expansion was acting as a catalyst for the debate over emancipation, and sectionalism grew more entrenched as questions concerning the morality of slavery grew louder. To these issues there were no easy solutions, and the compromises reached only provided band-aids to cover bullet holes. Jefferson's complex nature is compounded by the complexities of his times, his personal beliefs constrained by political and social realities, and his legacy ambiguous, used to justify both pro and anti slavery positions. With so many powerful forces at play, not even an intellectual giant such as Jefferson could discern a just and righteous solution to the problems of his day. His intellectual struggles with these issues are, however, indicative of his times, and serve to inform our discussions on the issues of race relations, sectionalism, and expansion.

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Jean Yarborough's comparative study of the language of the Declaration of Independence and the *Notes on the State of Virginia* is an interesting one, as she shows that the 'self-evident' equality of the Declaration is in contradiction with the scientific aspect of *Notes*. Her other primary contribution to Jefferson scholarship is her notion that the fatal flaw of the Founding Fathers in terms of slavery is that the moral debate over slavery was always trumped by self-preservation.