

Th: Jefferson

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From the President

Two centuries after pen met paper, Thomas Jefferson's words and those of the other founders are increasingly called upon in political discourse and modern communication. It seems that the American public's fascination with the founders continues to grow.

In an interesting study conducted during his fellowship at Monticello's Robert H. Smith International Center for Jefferson Studies, Graeme Thomson counted how many times modern presidents invoked the Founding Fathers in presidential rhetoric.

Thomson says he believes the primary reason Jefferson and the founders are so often quoted by modern presidents and politicians is the desire to channel feelings of unity and national pride.

Thomson said, "Presidents must be the chief articulators of national identity, their speeches very often seeking to encourage unity and a sense of shared purpose. It is through reference to the political heritage bequeathed by the Founding Fathers that the American public has always been led to understand their common ties."

Throughout the last century, members on both sides of the political aisle have invoked Jefferson's words in support of their policies. Thomson found that President William Jefferson Clinton made the most Jefferson references (at least 200) in his speeches. Somewhat surprisingly, Thomson found that prior to Clinton's presidency, it was Ronald Reagan who most frequently quoted Jefferson. Thomson says, "It was he [Reagan] who encouraged us to 'pluck a flower from Thomas Jefferson's life and wear it on our soul forever.'"

Those who quote the founders don't always get it right. Candidates and incumbents of all political stripes misquote the founding generation with some frequency. In his article "Price of Internet freedom? Eternal misquotes," *Washington Post* journalist David Fahrenthold attributes this trend to the willingness of many to believe whatever they read on the Internet, coupled with a "new obsession with the heroes of the American Revolution." It's not always political figures who do the misquoting. In one of October's televised presidential debates, the program's producers flashed the following quote from Jefferson on the Jumbotron® next to the candidates: "My reading of history convinces me that most bad government results from too much government." Too bad the quote is fake.

Many commentators like Fahrenthold recognize that the Thomas Jefferson Encyclopedia on Monticello's website is the place to find accurate Jefferson quotations. The Encyclopedia not only provides authentic quotes on a variety of topics, but also



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documents the first time a spurious Jefferson quote appeared in print (1913). A unique online database created by the staff at Monticello's Jefferson Library, the Encyclopedia has become a trusted resource for those seeking the real words of Jefferson. This summer the Encyclopedia surpassed 1,000 entries.

The Encyclopedia is enriched by ongoing research conducted at the Foundation's ICJS and *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*. Some 40 volumes, covering much of the earlier period of Jefferson's life and related topical materials, have been prepared in an ongoing effort located at Princeton University and published since 1950 by Princeton University Press.

In cooperation with Princeton, the Foundation sponsors a concurrent editorial project—*The Papers of Thomas Jefferson: Retirement Series*. The editorial staff at Monticello collects and edits Jefferson's written legacy from March 4, 1809, until his death on July 4, 1826. This scholarly enterprise, now numbering seven volumes and counting, is housed at the Jefferson Library; its proximity helps to enlarge the Encyclopedia as an invaluable and increasingly relevant resource for writers, researchers and Jefferson enthusiasts alike.

Words matter. To us, Jefferson's words matter. I hope you will join me in celebrating the addition this summer of the 1,000th article to the Thomas Jefferson Encyclopedia. Happy reading!

Sincerely,

Leslie Greene Bowman, President and CEO