The Influential Legacy of Thomas Jefferson

By Stephanie P. Newbold

Thomas Jefferson embodied the values, attitudes, and practices of the Enlightenment Period perhaps more than any other man of his time. Jefferson was fluent in five languages, the author of both the Declaration of Independence and over 16,000 published letters, Vice-President and President of the United States, founder of the University of Virginia, a lawyer, agronomist, musician, scientist, philosopher, author, architect, inventor and statesman. As a result of these varied intellectual and professional accomplishments, Jefferson shaped the founding framework of the United States of America in keeping with the Enlightenment understanding of natural law.

Although Thomas Jefferson was considered revolutionary for his own time, his remarkable legacy is that his ideals continue to progressively influence policies and legislation almost 175 years after his death. Jefferson believed that individuals were entitled to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, and if governments became tyrannical it was society’s obligation to revolt. Jefferson also desired universal education for Americans and passionately advocated for religious freedom.

The American Enlightenment Period involved, to a great extent, exploring and introducing new political theories, particularly those dealing with the termination of ties to Great Britain. Directly resulting from the Stamp Act, the Boston Tea Party, the Boston Massacre, along with the colonists’ firm belief that they should not be taxed without fair and equal representation in Britain’s Parliament, the Continental Congress issued the Declaration of Independence, authored by Jefferson, on July 4, 1776.

“The Declaration itself is based on Enlightenment ideas of contractual government; its form is that of a legal writ of breach of contract. In it, the Congress outlined all the areas in which Britain had failed to uphold its bonds with the colonies; the upshot of this was a declaration that all bonds and all relations between America and Great Britain were now null and void” (Hooker 4).

With the signing of the Declaration, the purpose of the war in Colonial America changed, in the sense that the war no longer involved complaints just about the implementation of British laws and policies. It was now a war for independence, and fighting revolutionary wars were significant events during the Enlightenment Period. In reference to the American Revolution, Jefferson wrote from Paris in 1787: "What country before ever existed a century and half
without rebellion? The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants” (Spurrin 8). Clearly, Jefferson understood the rationale for revolution against unjust governments.

Jefferson was a strong proponent of the belief that what human beings want most in life was comfort and stability, which he believed led to happiness, an excellent example of how he embodied the ideals of the Enlightenment Period. As Yarbrough pointed out:

“As Jefferson understands it, the right of each individual to pursue happiness does not arise solely from the selfish part of our constitution; it is also suggested to us by the generous desire to do good to others, or what the Scots called benevolence. Thus, the conception of rights in the Declaration is not reducible to the Lockean desire for comfortable self-preservation, but seeks to combine two different, and to some extent competing interests, selfish passions on the one hand with benevolence on the other” (4).

Jefferson believed that everyone was entitled to pursue happiness both for themselves and for others. And this pursuit was based on the idea that individuals want to do not only what is best for themselves, but they want to do what is best for their communities as well. So, according to Jeffersonian philosophy, happiness leads to stability within individuals and within societies; and if governments choose to take away this natural right, citizens must exercise their obligation to revolt.

John Locke’s influence on Thomas Jefferson proved invaluable, because Locke believed as did Jefferson, that tyrannical governments abused both civil societies and the state of nature. Jefferson, in explaining his position to the Continental Congress, believed that King George did not have the best interests of the colonists at heart, particularly since they thought of themselves as being taken advantage of financially. In A Summary View of the Rights of British America, Jefferson wrote:

“...These are our grievances which we have thus laid before his majesty, with that freedom of language and sentiment which becomes a free people claiming their rights, as derived from the laws of nature, and not as the gift of their chief magistrate... The whole art of government consists in the art of being honest. Only aim to do your duty and mankind will give you credit where you fail. No longer persevere in sacrificing the rights of one part of the empire to the inordinate desires of another; but deal out to all equal and impartial right. Let no act be passed by any one legislature, which may infringe on the rights and liberties of another. This is the important post in which fortune has placed you, holding the balance of a great, if a well poised empire. This, sire, is the advice of your great American council, on the observance of which may perhaps depend your felicity and future fame, and the preservation of that harmony which alone can continue both to Great Britain and America the reciprocal advantages of their connection” (Account of a Declaration).

Jefferson took from Locke the view that if a government does not protect the rights of its citizens, or if it chooses not to advocate in the best interest of its citizens, then it becomes the obligation of the people to revolt. Jefferson’s ideals, involving governments that choose not to
represent the needs of their constituencies, are clear representations of Enlightenment philosophy, both in Europe and in America.

In 1807, Jefferson continued his enlightened argument, advocating for acceptable revolution, when he wrote to M. deStael: "When patience has begotten false estimates of its motives, when wrongs are pressed because it is believed they will be borne, resistance becomes morality" (Coates Ch.5, p.6). In Jefferson's 1777 Notes on Religion, he again pointed out: "The oppressed should rebel, and they will continue to rebel and raise disturbance until their civil rights are fully restored to them and all partial distinctions, exclusions and incapacitations are removed" (Coates Ch.5, p. 6). Clearly, Jefferson's famous motto Rebellion to tyrants is obedience to God was rooted into this revolutionary and enlightened philosophy.

Jefferson also maintained enlightenment attitudes involving a society's reformation period after revolution. In his Autobiography Jefferson noted that reformed governments must have the following in order to ensure successful transformations from tyrannies:

1. Freedom of the person by habeas corpus. 2. Freedom of conscience. 3. Freedom of the press. 4. Trial by jury. 5. A representative legislature. 6. Annual meetings. 7. The orientation of laws. 8. The exclusive right of taxation and appropriation. And 9. The responsibility of ministers; and with the exercise of these powers they would obtain in future whatever might be further necessary to improve and preserve their constitution" (47).

However, Jefferson was not naïve enough to think that these tasks would be easy to accomplish, particularly after a revolution had taken place. In a letter to John Adams in 1821, Jefferson wrote on that every idea:

"The generation which commences a revolution rarely completes it. Habituated from their infancy to passive submission of body and mind to their kings and priests, they are not qualified when called on to think and provide for themselves; and their inexperience, their ignorance and bigotry make them instruments often in the hands of Bonapartes and Iturbides to defeat their own rights and purposes" (Coates Ch.5, p.8).

In another letter to Lafayette, Jefferson expanded on the notion of how difficult it was to achieve a successful reformation: "No one, I hope, can doubt my wish to see...all mankind exercising self-government, and capable of exercising it. But the question is not what we wish, but what is practicable" (Coates Ch. 5, pg.2). One of the key elements for those who followed the ideology of the Enlightenment was the ability to use logical reasoning over any other form of reasoning. Jefferson's notions involving revolution and reform supported Enlightenment ideology, because they sought out not only what would be best for all members of a functioning society, but also what was the most efficient, effective and representative form of governance.

Universal education was another way Jefferson exhibited ideas, attitudes and values of the Enlightenment Period, for Jefferson believed that education was the best way for individuals to achieve happiness for themselves and for their communities. While serving in the Virginia General Assembly, Jefferson assisted with a proposal for universal education,
involving:

"1. Elementary schools, for all children generally, rich and poor, without distinction. 2. Colleges, or, as they are more usually styled in this country, academics, for a middle degree on instruction, calculated for the common purposes of life, yet such as would be desirable for all who were in easy circumstances. 3. A University, in the place of William and Mary College, constituting the ultimate grade for teaching the sciences generally, and in their highest degree" (Coates Ch. 13, p. 1).

Jefferson advocated for universal education, a prominently accepted Enlightenment ideal, because educating all was the best way for people to develop their logical reasoning skills, upon which Jefferson believed individuals became capable of forming factual opinions and establishing stable and lasting governments.

Thomas Jefferson was a continual supporter of religious freedom, which was one of the key arguments in the Enlightenment Period. Jefferson believed that once individuals could logically reason for themselves, they were capable of choosing their personal religious beliefs, for with an educated populous, the government would have no need to force any specific religious ideology onto their people. While in the Virginia General Assembly, Jefferson proposed a bill for the establishment of religious freedom, and "with the exception of the Declaration of Independence, it is the most celebrated of Jefferson's productions, and the one to which he recurred with the highest pride and satisfaction" (Thomas Jefferson on Religious Freedom). Jefferson argued that forcing individuals to worship, obey or follow any specific religious doctrine was a violation of civil liberty and infringed upon natural rights. In Section II of this bill, Jefferson noted:

"We the General Assembly of Virginia do enact that no man shall be compelled to frequent or support any religious worship, place, or ministry whatsoever, nor shall be enforced, restrained, molested, or burthened in his body or goods, nor shall otherwise suffer, on account of his religious opinions or beliefs; but that all men shall be free to profess, and by argument to maintain, their opinions in matters of religion, and that the same shall in no wise diminish, enlarge, or affect their civil capacities" (Thomas Jefferson on Religious Freedom).

Jefferson's support for religious freedom was perhaps one of the most convincing ways he exhibited the values, attitudes and practices of the Enlightenment.

In his first Inaugural Address, Jefferson expressed the importance of America being a country that granted religious freedom: "And let us reflect that, having banished from our land, that religious intolerance under which mankind so long bled and suffered, we have yet gained little if we countenance a political intolerance as despotic, as wicked, and capable of as bitter and bloody persecutions" (Thomas Jefferson - Addresses, Messages and Replies). Jefferson continued this argument in his book, Notes on the State of Virginia: "The legislative powers of government extend to such acts only as are injurious to others. But it does me no injury for my neighbor to say there are twenty gods or no god. It neither picks my pocket, nor breaks my leg" (Peterson 6). Hence, Jefferson believed that any government who outlawed or persecuted individuals on the basis of their religious beliefs could never be free, for men and
women do not answer to society on behalf of their religious beliefs; they answer solely to God.

The Enlightenment ideals of Thomas Jefferson had significant impacts and affects on future generations of Americans as well. In 1848, Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton headed the Seneca Falls Convention, in which they initiated and created *A Declaration of Sentiments*, echoing the principles of Jefferson, demanding equality and inalienable rights for both women and men. In 1954, the Supreme Court rendered its historic decision in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka Kansas*, outlawing segregation in public schools. *Brown* embodied Jeffersonian ideals, because at the time of this decision, African-American segregated schools received significantly lower amounts of funding than did Caucasian segregated schools. Thus, the Supreme Council decision solidified the notion that “separate but equal” was not equal, because the quality of public educational systems in America was not universally equivalent. And finally, in 1962, in the Supreme Court’s case of *Engle v. Vitale*, the justices ruled in favor that mandatory prayer in public schools was unconstitutional, which thus supported Jefferson’s strong belief in the freedom of religion.

The values, attitudes and practices of the Enlightenment had a profound impact on both Thomas Jefferson and the rest of the founding generation of Americans. Jefferson’s influence was so large that Americans can still find his presence in some of the most controversial policies and heavily debated judicial decisions that confront and challenge the very core of this country’s foundation.
Works Cited:


This work featured over thirty historical documents, sixty-seven biographical sketches, and twenty-five essays involving the causes and circumstances of the American Revolution. The cited references from this work focused on John Locke's influence on Thomas Jefferson.

www.etext.virginia.edu/jefferson/quotations.


This citation focused on Jefferson's idea of universal education, and the proposal he made to implement this policy in the Virginia Assembly.

This work came from the Jefferson archives at the University of Virginia, and focused on Jefferson's attitudes, values and ideas on revolution and reform, and also how it was the responsibility of citizens to revolt against tyrannical government.

www.wsu.edu:8000/~dee/AMERICA/REV.HTM

This research focused on the American Revolution and how the ideas of the Enlightenment Period affected the founding fathers' political theories. This work also emphasized where the Continental Congress thought the British Parliament had failed Colonial America.


The research for this citation was gathered from Jefferson's *Autobiography,* which involved how societies and governments successfully reformed after a revolution occurred.


This piece of literature was the actual bill Jefferson proposed in the Virginia State Legislature. It was cited to show how Jefferson's philosophy concerning religious freedom correlated with that of the Enlightenment Period.

Jefferson, Thomas. *Addresses, Messages, and Replies.*

This work consisted of addresses, messages and replies written and spoken by Jefferson, without edits or revisions. For this research, Jefferson's first inaugural address was cited to account for his support of religious freedom.

This work also supported Jefferson's Enlightenment ideas about religious freedom and how
governments should always honor that.


This work primarily emphasized the need for revolution when tyrannical leaders come to power,
in order for the reformation of civil society to occur.

Yarbrough, Jean M. *American Virtues: Thomas Jefferson on the Character of a Free People.*

For this paper, Chapter 1: “The Declaration and the American Character,” was used
to show Jefferson's strong belief that individuals should be given the right to pursue happiness
for themselves and for others.

Consulted Works:


to Locke, Montesquieu, Jefferson, and the Federalists From Utilitarianism, Historicism, Marxism,
Freudianism, Pragmatism, Existentialism.*

Wilmington: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 1997.

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