

perfection of Man, his perfectability being already proved by Price Priestly, Condorcet Rousseau Diderot and Godwin.² . . .

Your distinction between the aristoi and pseudo aristoi, will not help the matter. I would trust one as soon as the other with unlimited Power. The Law wisely refuses an Oath as a witness in his own cause to the Saint as well as to the Sinner.

1753

Thomas Jefferson 1743–1826

The fluctuations in Thomas Jefferson's reputation since his death in 1826 have paralleled the most vigorously debated controversies over how people in the United States are to understand themselves as a nation and as individuals. As the author of the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson has been praised as a champion of democracy, equality, and human rights, but he has also been criticized for supposed betrayals of his own ideals or outright failures of character. Most recently such criticism has tended to focus on the tension between his claim that all men have inalienable natural rights, with liberty chief among them, and his continuing ownership of slaves, an issue also raised in his own lifetime by those who wished to discredit his egalitarianism.

Born at Shadwell, a family farm near the present-day Monticello but at that time near the western frontier of Virginia, Jefferson was the son of Jane Randolph and Peter Jefferson, the former a member of one of Virginia's most prominent and influential families and the latter a landowner, magistrate, surveyor, and mapmaker. After his father's death, Jefferson attended William and Mary College and subsequently studied law with George Wythe, one of the best legal scholars of colonial America. After admission to the bar, he practiced law, played a part in Virginia colonial politics, and became increasingly critical of England's attempts to exert

authority in the American colonies. His 1774 pamphlet, *A Summary View of the Rights of British America*, caught the attention of readers outside of Virginia with its bold argument that Americans had effectively freed themselves from royal and parliamentary authority by exercising "a right which nature has given to all men, of departing from the country in which chance, not choice has placed them," and in all likelihood it led to his appointment in 1776 to the committee charged with drafting the Declaration of Independence.

Jefferson's Declaration has become, along with the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, a founding document of the United States; not law itself, it is a fundamental expression of the moral and political ideals of American society. As Abraham Lincoln put it in 1861, "It was [the Declaration] which gave promise that in due time the weights should be lifted from the shoulders of all men, and that all should have an equal chance."

While serving as governor of Virginia, Jefferson received a questionnaire from François Marbois, secretary to the French legation in Philadelphia, asking for information on the state. His answers eventually appeared as his only full-length book, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1787), which was both a pioneering attempt at a scientific study of a community and an effort to direct the culture and political formation of the post-revolutionary state. As he gathered information for *Notes*, Jefferson real-

ized he had an occasion to address the claims of the Abbé Reynal and the Count de Buffon, the most famous naturalist of the time, that animals and people in the New World were smaller, less vigorous, and generally degenerate when compared to similar organisms in the Old World. The argument was seemingly biological, but its implications were political and cultural. If people dwindled in physical vigor, what sort of society could they be expected to maintain? Jefferson's refutation of Buffon's theory vindicated Native American virtues in order to defend American character. In Query XIX, "Manufactures," Jefferson offered a more implicit defense of the American environment that was also a classic statement of his agrarian ideal: "Those who labour in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever he had a chosen people, whose breasts he has made his peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue. . . . Corruption of morals in the mass of cultivators is a phaenomenon of which no age nor nation has furnished the example."

Jefferson used the occasion of *Notes* to pursue his republican political agenda, but here his comments became more problematic. He used chapters on "Laws" and "Manners," among others, to criticize the failings of Virginia's legal system, particularly its failure to remedy the evil of slavery. Queries XIV and XVIII strongly condemned the institution of slavery, but in the former chapter he argued that emancipation should be linked to removal of blacks to a separate colony where they could be "a free and independent people." In explaining the necessity of colonization, he revealed a strain of racialist thinking that was all too common both in his time and later—even though some of his friends who read *Notes* singled out these passages for criticism—but extremely disturbing in ours. Despite the examples of black achievement presented to him, such as the almanac of Benjamin Banneker, and, indeed, his long intimate relationship with the slave Sally Hemmings, about whom he

clearly cared, he never retreated from his belief in the desirability of the eventual separation of the races.

Like many later white abolitionists, Jefferson was able to simultaneously maintain an opposition to slavery with what we would regard as a basically racist attitude. Critics have charged that his racist feelings explain his apparent reluctance to do more to oppose slavery, but the problem is more complex. The rejection in 1776 of his clause in the Declaration about slavery and the subsequent unwillingness of the Virginia legislature to take up emancipation—when he was one of the committee revising its laws—would have made him realize the enormous difficulties in changing the opinions of his Virginian contemporaries. In addition, Jefferson was unwilling to ostracize himself from his neighbors when he thought that there was more he could do in Virginia to secure a free society.

Jefferson served two terms as president of the United States (1801–1809). As president, he brought his commitment to education and agrarianism to bear upon Indian policy. The U.S. Constitution reserves to the federal government alone the right to treat with Indians as sovereign nations. As Handsome Lake's narrative, printed earlier in this volume, indicates, Indian tribes were being devastated by the most corrupting aspects of Anglo-American culture. Jefferson's letter to Handsome Lake indicates Jefferson's sympathy with Handsome Lake's revival and his own very European conception of property. Jefferson's "civilizing" policy, described in his letter to Benjamin Hawkins, aimed to gradually incorporate Indians into the fabric of the United States, first, by moderating the expansion of Anglo-Americans into Indian lands, and second, by simultaneously sending agents of civilization—missionaries, teachers, craftsmen, agricultural instructors, and federal agents to regulate trade and intercept contraband alcohol—to Indian tribes in order to prepare them to abandon hunting, and the large land areas their semi-nomadic lifestyle required, in

appeal here to American incorrupt-
ic and satiric.

favor of sedentary, village agricultural life. Jefferson believed that Indians thus assimilated, could "be absorbed to their infinite advantage, within the American population" who were settling on their lands. Throughout his two terms in office, however, factions on both sides resisted the Jeffersonian solution.

In the last quarter of his life, faced with what he felt was the impossibility of arguing Virginians into abolition, Jefferson concentrated on the coming generation. Slavery would have to be abolished, he told Edward Coles in 1814, by "the young . . . who can follow it up, and bear it through to its consummation." As Jefferson makes clear in his letters to Peter Carr and Nathaniel Burwell, the principal resource of future generations of men and women would be a solid education that trained the reason and the moral sense for

"the real businesses of life." His own contribution, he thought, would be to found the University of Virginia as a means to encourage progress toward a republican future.

Jefferson wanted to be remembered on his grave marker as the author of the Declaration and of the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom and as the father of the University of Virginia. His primary commitment was to intellectual freedom; he believed that liberated reason would ultimately purge the world of tyranny and oppression, but his optimism also seemed to many to ignore the real suffering of the world.

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taken up the greater parts of the 2d 3d & 4th days of July were, in the evening of the last, closed the declaration was reported by the commtee, agreed to by the house and signed by every member present except Mr. Dickinson. As the sentiments of men are known not only by what they receive, but what they reject also, I will state the form of the declaration as originally reported. The parts struck out by Congress shall be distinguished by a black line drawn under them; & those inserted by them shall be placed in the margin or in a concurrent column.¹

A Declaration by the Representatives of the United States of America, in General Congress Assembled

When, in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth the separate and equal station to which the laws of nature and of nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

We hold these truths to be self evident: that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with CERTAIN [*inherent and*] inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; that to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed; that whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new government, laying its foundation on such principles, and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness. Prudence, indeed, will dictate that governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly all experience hath shown that mankind are more disposed to suffer while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed. But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, [*begun at a distinguished period and*] pursuing invariably the same object, evinces a design to reduce them under absolute despotism, it is their right, it is their duty to throw off such government, and to provide new guards for their future security. Such has been the patient sufferance of these colonies; and such is now the necessity which constrains them to ALTER [*expunge*] their former systems of government. The history of the present king of Great Britain is a history of REPEATED [*unremitting*] injuries and usurpations, ALL HAVING [*among which appears no solitary fact to contradict the uniform tenor of the rest, but all have*] in direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over these states. To prove this, let facts be submitted to a candid world [*for the truth of which we pledge a faith yet unsullied by falsehood*].

He has refused his assent to laws the most wholesome and necessary for the public good.

¹Here the parts struck out by Congress are italicized and in brackets; the words added by Congress are in large capitals.

12 PRIMARY WORKS

— *Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Lipscomb and Bergh, 1903–1904; *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, 1950–; *Notes on the State of Virginia*, ed. William Peden, 1954; *Thomas Jefferson: Writings*, Library of America, ed. Merrill Peterson, 1984.

from Autobiography of Thomas Jefferson

Congress proceeded the same day to consider the declaration of Independence which had been reported & lain on the table the Friday preceding, and on Monday referred to a commtee of the whole. The pusillaninous idea that we had friends in England worth keeping terms with, still haunted the minds of many. For this reason those passages which conveyed censures on the people of England were struck out, lest they should give them offence. The clause too, reprobatng the enslaving the inhabitants of Africa, was struck out in complaisance to South Carolina and Georgia, who had never attempted to restrain the importation of slaves, and who on the contrary still wished to continue it. Our northern brethren also I believe felt a little tender under those censures; for tho' their people have very few slaves themselves yet had been pretty considerable carriers of them to others. The debates having

He has forbidden his governors to pass laws of immediate and pressing importance, unless suspended in their operation till his assent should be obtained; and, when so suspended, he has utterly neglected to attend to them.

He has refused to pass other laws for the accommodation of large districts of people, unless those people would relinquish the right of representation in the legislature, a right inestimable to them, and formidable to tyrants only.

He has called together legislative bodies at places unusual, uncomfortable, and distant from the depository of their public records, for the sole purpose of fatiguing them into compliance with his measures.

He has dissolved representative houses repeatedly *[and continually]* for opposing with manly firmness his invasions on the rights of the people.

He has refused for a long time after such dissolutions to cause others to be elected, whereby the legislative powers, incapable of annihilation, have returned to the people at large for their exercise, the state remaining, in the meantime, exposed to all the dangers of invasion from without and convulsions within.

He has endeavored to prevent the population of these states; for that purpose obstructing the laws for naturalization of foreigners, refusing to pass others to encourage their migrations hither, and raising the conditions of new appropriations of lands.

He has OBSTRUCTED *[suffered]* the administration of justice BY *[totally to cease in some of these states]* refusing his assent to laws for establishing judiciary powers.

He has made *[our]* judges dependent on his will alone for the tenure of their offices, and the amount and payment of their salaries.

He has erected a multitude of new offices, *[by a self-assumed power]* and sent other swarms of new officers to harass our people and eat out their substance.

He has kept among us in times of peace standing armies *[and ships of war]* without the consent of our legislatures.

He has affected to render the military independent of, and superior to, the civil power.

He has combined with others to subject us to a jurisdiction foreign to our constitutions and unacknowledged by our laws, giving his assent to their acts of pretended legislation for quartering large bodies of armed troops among us; for protecting them by a mock trial from punishment for any murders which they should commit on the inhabitants of these states; for cutting off our trade with all parts of the world; for imposing taxes on us without our consent; for depriving us IN MANY CASES of the benefits of trial by jury; for transporting us beyond seas to be tried for pretended offences; for abolishing the free system of English laws in a neighboring province, establishing therein an arbitrary government, and enlarging its boundaries, so as to render it at once an example and fit instrument for introducing the same absolute rule into these COLONIES *[states]*; for taking away our charters, abolishing our most valuable laws, and altering fundamentally the forms of our governments; for suspending our own legislatures, and declaring themselves invested with power to legislate for us in all cases whatsoever.

He has abdicated government here BY DECLARING US OUT OF HIS PROTECTION, AND WAGING WAR AGAINST US *[withdrawing his governors, and us out of his allegiance and protection]*.

He has plundered our seas, ravaged our coasts, burnt our towns, and destroyed the lives of our people.

He is at this time transporting large armies of foreign mercenaries to complete the works of death, desolation and tyranny already begun with circumstances of cruelty and perfidy SCARCELY PARALLELED IN THE MOST BARBAROUS AGES, AND TOTALLY unworthy the head of a civilized nation.

He has constrained our fellow citizens taken captive on the high seas, to bear arms against their country, to become the executioners of their friends and brethren, or to fall themselves by their hands:

He has EXCITED DOMESTIC INSURRECTION AMONG US, AND HAS endeavored to bring on the inhabitants of our frontiers, the merciless Indian savages, whose known rule of warfare is an undistinguished destruction of all ages, sexes and conditions *[of existence]*.

[He has incited treasonable insurrections of our fellow citizens, with the allurements of forfeiture and confiscation of our property.]

He has waged cruel war against human nature itself, violating its most sacred rights of life and liberty in the persons of a distant people who never offended him, captivating and carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere, or to incur miserable death in their transportation hither. This piratical warfare, the opprobrium of INFIDEL powers, is the warfare of the CHRISTIAN king of Great Britain. Determined to keep open a market where MEN should be bought and sold, he has prostituted his negative for suppressing every legislative attempt to prohibit or to restrain this execrable commerce. And that this assemblage of horrors might want no fact of distinguished die, he is now exciting those very people to rise in arms among us, and to purchase that liberty of which he has deprived them, by murdering the people on whom he also obtruded them: thus paying off former crimes committed against the LIBERTIES of one people, with crimes which he urges them to commit against the LIVES of another.]

In every stage of these oppressions we have petitioned for redress in the most humble terms: our repeated petitions have been answered only by repeated injuries.

A prince whose character is thus marked by every act which may define a tyrant is unfit to be the ruler of a FREE people *[who mean to be free. Future ages will scarcely believe that the hardiness of one man adventured, within the short compass of twelve years only, to lay a foundation so broad and so undisguised for tyranny over a people fostered and fixed in principles of freedom.]*

Nor have we been wanting in attentions to our British brethren. We have warned them from time to time of attempts by their legislature to extend AN UNWARRANTABLE *[a]* jurisdiction over US *[these our states]*. We have reminded them of the circumstances of our emigration and settlement here, *[no one of which could warrant so strange a pretension: that these were effected at the expense of our own blood and treasure, unassisted by the wealth or the strength of Great Britain: that in constituting indeed our several forms of government, we had adopted one common king, thereby laying a foundation for perpetual league and amity with them: but that submission to their parliament was no part of our constitution, nor ever in idea, if history may be credited: and,]* we HAVE appealed to their native justice and magnanimity AND WE HAVE CONJURED THEM BY *[as well as to]* the ties of our common kindred to disavow these usurpations which WOULD INEVITABLY *[were*

likely to] interrupt our connection and correspondence. They too have been deaf to the voice of justice and of consanguinity. WE MUST THEREFORE [and when occasions have been given them, by the regular course of their laws, of removing from their councils the disturbers of our harmony, they have, by their free election, re-established them in power. At this very time too, they are permitting their chief magistrate to send over not only soldiers of our common blood, but Scotch and foreign mercenaries to invade and destroy us. These facts have given the last stab to agonizing affection, and manly spirit bids us to renounce forever these unfeeling brethren. We must endeavor to forget our former love for them, and hold them as we hold the rest of mankind, enemies in war, in peace friends. We might have a free and a great people together; but a communication of grandeur and of freedom, it seems, is below their dignity. Be it so, since they will have it. The road to happiness and to glory is open to us, too. We will tread it apart from them, and] acquiesce in the necessity which denounces our [eternal] separation AND HOLD THEM AS WE HOLD THE REST OF MANKIND, ENEMIES IN WAR, IN PEACE FRIENDS!

²We therefore the representatives of the United States of America in General Congress assembled, do in the name, and by the authority of the good people of these [states reject and renounce all allegiance and subjection to the kings of Great Britain and all others who may hereafter claim by, through or under them; we utterly dissolve all political connection which may heretofore have subsisted between us and the people or parliament of Great Britain: and finally we do assert and declare these colonies to be free and independent states,] and that as free and independent states, they have full power to levy war, conclude peace, contract alliances, establish commerce, and to do all other acts and things which independent states may of right do.

And for the support of this declaration, we mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor.

The Declaration thus signed on the 4th, on paper, was engrossed on parchment, and signed again on the 2d of August.

This closing section, where additions and changes have been lengthy, the editors follow the original version in the

We, therefore, the representatives of the United States of America in General Congress assembled, appealing to the supreme judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions, do in the name, and by the authority of the good people of these colonies, solemnly publish and declare, that these united colonies are, and of right ought to be free and independent states; that they are absolved from all allegiance to the British crown, and that all political connection between them and the state of Great Britain is, and ought to be, totally dissolved; and that as free and independent states, they have full power to levy war, conclude peace, contract alliances, establish commerce, and to do all other acts and things which independent states may of right do.

And for the support of this declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of divine providence, we mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor.

left column, and the final adopted text in the right column.