JEFFERSON IN HIS TIME

"If America is wrong, Jefferson is wrong," an early biographer wrote. "If America is right, Jefferson is right." This year, on his 250th birthday, it would appear that Jefferson was wrong. Many historians of late have found the third U.S. president guilty of racism and other sins that besmirch the national character. Gordon Wood, by contrast, argues that Jefferson has never been an apt mirror of America. He was a representative figure of his day whose words haunt us because, unlike him, they transcend his own time.

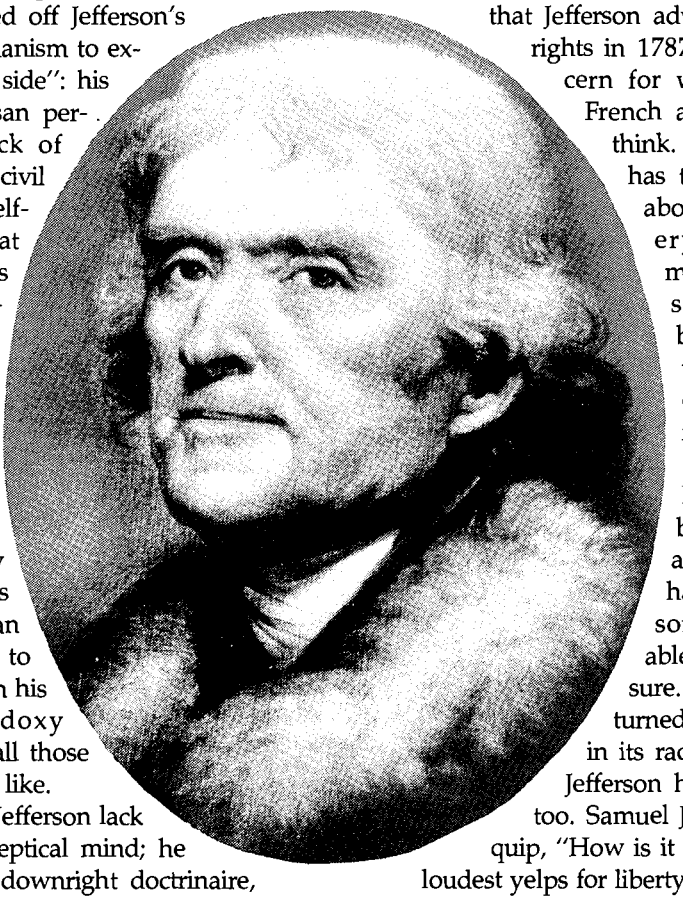
BY GORDON WOOD

Americans seem to have forgotten nothing about Thomas Jefferson, except that he was once a living, breathing human being. Throughout our history, Jefferson has served as a symbol of what we as a people are, someone invented, manipulated, turned into something we like or dislike within ourselves—whether it is populism or elitism, agrarianism or racism, atheism or liberalism. We continually ask ourselves whether Jefferson still survives, or what still lives in his thought, and we quote him on nearly every side of every major question in our history. No figure in our past has embodied so much of our heritage and so many of our hopes.

In his superb *The Jefferson Image in the American Mind* (1960), Merrill Peterson showed that American culture has always used Jefferson as "a sensitive reflector . . . of America's troubled search for the image of itself." The symbolizing, the image-mongering, and the identifying of Jefferson with America has not changed a bit since Peterson's book was published, even though the level of professional historical scholarship has never been higher. If anything the association of Jefferson with America has become more complete. During the past three turbulent decades many people, including some historians, have concluded that something is seriously wrong with America and, therefore, that something has to be wrong with Jefferson.

The opening blast in this criticism of Jef-

ferson was probably Leonard Levy's *Jefferson and Civil Liberties: The Darker Side* (1963). No subtle satire, no gentle mocking of the ironies of Jefferson's inconsistencies and hypocrisies, Levy's book was a prosecutor's indictment. Levy ripped off Jefferson's mantle of libertarianism to expose his "darker side": his passion for partisan persecution, his lack of concern for basic civil liberties, and a self-righteousness that became at times out-and-out ruthlessness. Far from being the skeptical enlightened intellectual, allowing all ideas their free play, Jefferson was portrayed by Levy and others as something of an ideologue, eager to fill the young with his political orthodoxy while censoring all those books he did not like.



Not only did Jefferson lack an original or skeptical mind; he could in fact be downright doctrinaire, an early version of a "knee-jerk liberal." In this respect he was very different from his more skeptical and inquisitive friend James Madison. Jefferson, for example, could understand the opening struggles of the French Revolution only in terms of a traditional liberal antagonism to an arrogant and overgrown monarchy. He supported the addition of a bill of rights to the federal Constitution not because he had thought through the issue the way Madison had but largely because he believed that a bill of rights was what good governments were supposed to have. All of his liberal aristocratic French friends said so; indeed, as he told his fellow Americans, "the enlightened part of Europe have given us the greatest credit for inventing this instrument of security for the rights of the people, and have been not a little surprised to see us so soon give it up." One almost has the feeling that Jefferson advocated a bill of rights in 1787–88 out of concern for what his liberal French associates would think. One sometimes has the same feeling about his antislavery statements, many of which seem to have been shaped to the expectations of enlightened foreigners.

It is in fact his views on black Americans and slavery that have made Jefferson most vulnerable to modern censure. If America has turned out to be wrong in its race relations, then Jefferson had to be wrong too. Samuel Johnson with his quip, "How is it that we hear the loudest yelps for liberty from the drivers of Negroes?" had nothing on modern critics. Who could not find the contrast between Jefferson's great declarations of liberty and equality and his life-long ownership of slaves glaringly inconsistent? Jefferson undoubtedly hated slavery and believed that the self-evident truths that he had set forth in 1776 ought eventually to doom the institution in the United States. Early in his career he tried unsuccessfully to facilitate the manumission of slaves in Virginia, and in the 1780s he worked hard to have slavery abolished in the new western territories. But unlike George Washington, he was never able to free all of his slaves. More than that, as recent historians

have emphasized, he bought, bred, and flogged his slaves, and he hunted down fugitives in much the same way his fellow Virginia planters did—all the while declaring that American slavery was not as bad as that of the ancient Romans.

Some recent historians even claim that Jefferson's attitudes and actions toward blacks were so repugnant that identifying the Sage of Monticello with antislavery discredits the reform movement. Jefferson could never truly imagine freed blacks living in a white man's America, and throughout his life he insisted that the emancipation of the slaves be accompanied by their expulsion from the country. He wanted all blacks sent to the West Indies, or Africa, or anywhere out of the United States. In the end, it has been said, Jefferson loaded such conditions on the abolition of slavery that the antislavery movement could scarcely get off the ground. In response to the pleas of younger men that he speak out against slavery, he offered only excuses for delay.

His remedy of expulsion was based on racial fear and antipathy. While he had no apprehensions about mingling white blood with that of the Indian, he never ceased expressing his "great aversion" to miscegenation between blacks and whites. When the Roman slave was freed, Jefferson wrote, he "might mix with, without staining the blood of his master." When the black slave was freed, however, he had "to be removed beyond the reach of mixture." Although Jefferson believed that the Indians were uncivilized, he always admired them and made all sorts of environmental explanations for their differences from whites. Yet he was never able to do the same for the African American. Instead, he lastingly clung to the view that blacks were inherently inferior to whites in both body and mind.

It has even been suggested that Jefferson's obsession (shared by so many other Americans) with black sensuality was largely a projection of his own repressed—and, perhaps in the case of his attractive mulatto slave Sally Hemings, not-so-repressed—libidinal desires. The charge that Jefferson maintained Hemings as his mistress for decades and fathered several children by her was first made by an unscrupulous newspaperman, James Callender, in 1802. Since then, historians and others have periodically resurrected the accusation. In fact, in the most recent study of Jefferson's political thought, political scientist Garrett Ward Sheldon treats Jefferson's "keeping of a black mistress" as an established fact, a "common transgression of his class."

In her 1974 psychobiography of Jefferson the late Fawn Brodie made the most ingenious and notorious use of Callender's accusation, building up her case for the passionate liaison between Jefferson and his mullato slave largely through contrived readings of evidence and even the absence of evidence. In accord with our modern soap-opera sensibilities, Brodie naturally turned the relationship into a secret love affair. Brodie's suggestion of a love match aroused a great deal of controversy, perhaps because so many people believed it or at least were titillated by it. A novel based on Brodie's concoctions was written, and there was even talk of a TV movie.

These may seem like small and silly matters, but they are not—not where Jefferson is involved—for the nature of American society itself is at stake. The relationship with Sally Hemings may be implausible to those who know Jefferson's character intimately. He was, after all, a man who never indulged his passions but always suppressed them. But whether he had a relationship with Hemings, there is no denying that Jefferson presided

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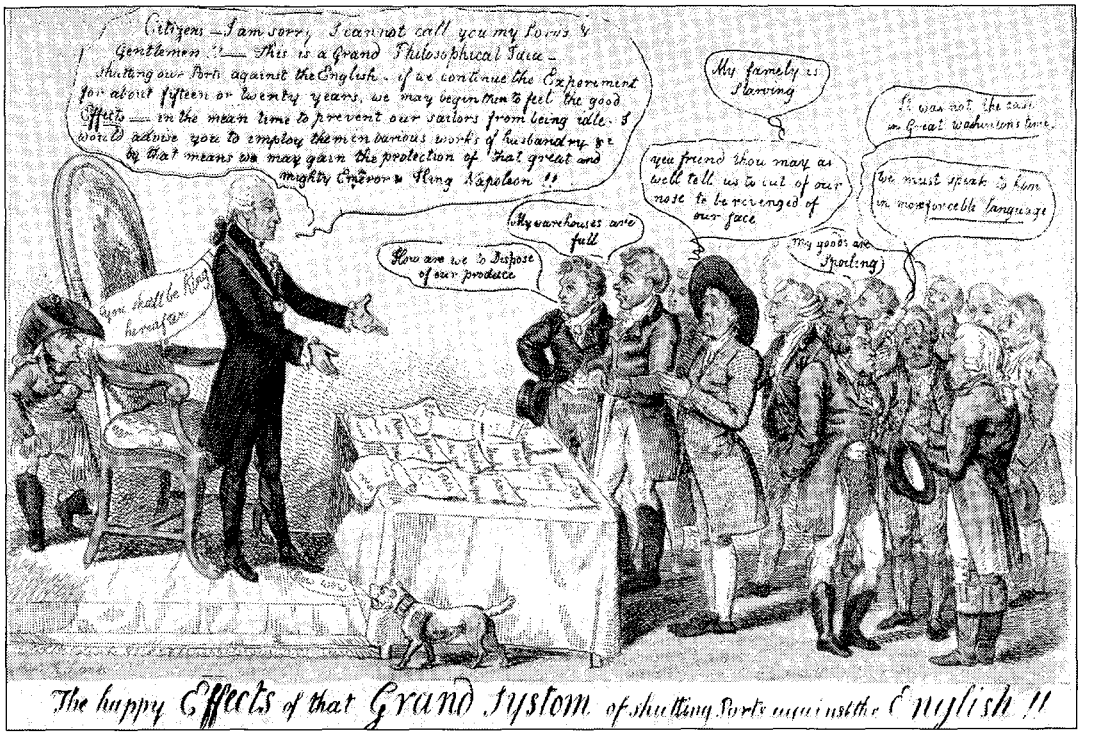


The Embargo Act (1807) severely damaged President Jefferson's popularity. A contemporary cartoon depicted him as at once an impractical dreamer and a would-be monarch.

over a household in which miscegenation took place, a miscegenation that he believed was morally repugnant. Thus any attempt to make Jefferson's Monticello a model patriarchal plantation is compromised at the outset.

Everyone, it seems, sees America in Jefferson. When Garry Wills in his *Inventing America* (1978) argued that Jefferson's Declaration of Independence owed less to the individualism of John Locke and more to the communitarian sentiments of the Scottish moralist Francis Hutcheson, one critic accused Wills of aiming "to supply the history of the Republic with as pink a dawn as possible." So too the shame and guilt that Jefferson must have suffered from his involvement in slavery and racial mixing best represents the shame and guilt that white Americans feel in their tortured relations with blacks. Where Jefferson for Vernon Louis Parrington and his generation of the 1920s, '30s, and '40s had been the solution, Jefferson for this present generation has become the problem. The Jefferson that emerges out of much recent scholarship therefore resembles the America that many critics have visualized in the past three decades—self-righteous, guilt-ridden, racist, doctrinaire, and filled with liberal pieties that under stress are easily sacrificed.

Quite clearly, no historical figure can bear this kind of symbolic burden and still remain a real person. Beneath all the images, beneath all the allegorical Jeffersons, there once was a human being with very human frailties and foibles. Certainly Jefferson's words and ideas transcended his time, but he himself did not.

The human Jefferson was essentially a man of the 18th century, a very intelligent and bookish slaveholding southern planter, enlightened and progressive no doubt, but like all human beings possessing as many weaknesses as strengths, inclined as much to folly as to wisdom. Like most people

caught up in fast-moving events and complicated changing circumstances, the human Jefferson was as much a victim as he was a protagonist of those events and circumstances. Despite all his achievements in the Revolution and in the subsequent decades, he was never in control of the popular forces he ostensibly led; indeed, he never even fully comprehended these forces. It is the ultimate irony of Jefferson's life, in a life filled with ironies, that he should not have understood the democratic revolution that he himself supremely spoke for.

It is true that much of Jefferson's thinking was conventional, although, as historian William Freehling points out, he did have "an extraordinary gift of lending grace to conventionalities." He had to be conventional or he could never have had the impact he had on his contemporaries. His writing of the Declaration of Independence, he later correctly recalled, was "not to find out new principles, or new arguments, never before thought of . . . ; but to place before mankind the common sense of the subject, in terms so plain and firm as to command their assent, and to justify ourselves in the independent stand we are compelled to take."

Jefferson's extraordinary impressionability, learning, and virtuosity were the source of his conventionality. He was very well-read and extremely sensitive to the avant-garde intellectual currents of his day. And he was eager to discover just what was the best, most politically correct, and most enlightened in the world of the 18th century. It was his insatiable hunger for knowledge and his remarkable receptivity to all that was new and progressive that put him at the head of the American Enlightenment.

The 18th-century Enlightenment represented the pushing back of the boundaries of darkness and what was called Gothic barbarism and the spreading of light and knowledge. This struggle occurred on many fronts. Some saw the central battle taking place in natural science and in the increasing understanding of nature. Some saw it occurring mostly in religion, with the tempering of enthusiasm and the elimination of superstition. Others saw it happening mainly in politics—in driving back the forces of tyranny and in the creating of new free governments. Still others saw it in the spread of civility and refinement and in the increase in the small, seemingly insignificant ways that life was being made easier, politer, more comfortable, more enjoyable for more and more people. In one way or another, the Enlightenment activities involved the imposition of order and reason on the world. To contemplate aesthetically an ordered universe and to know the best that was thought and said in the world—that was enlightenment.

Jefferson participated fully in all aspects of the 18th-century Enlightenment. He was probably the American Revolutionary leader most taken with the age's liberal prescriptions for enlightenment, gentility, and refinement. He was born in 1743 the son of a wealthy but uneducated and ungenteel planter from western Virginia. He attended the College of William and Mary, the first of his father's family to attend college. Like many of the Revolutionary leaders who were also the first of their family to acquire a liberal arts education in college, he wanted a society led by an aristocracy of talent and taste. For too long men had been judged by who their fathers were or whom they had married. In a new enlightened republican society they would be judged by merit and virtue and taste alone.

Jefferson was not one to let his feelings show, but even today we can sense beneath the placid surface of his autobiography, written in 1821 at the age of 77, some of his anger at all those Virginians who prided themselves on their genealogy and judged men by their family background.

In its opening pages Jefferson tells us that the lineage of his Welsh father was lost in obscurity: He was able to find in Wales only two references to his father's family. His mother, on the other hand, was a Randolph, one of the distinguished families of Virginia. The

Randolphs, he said with about as much derision as he ever allowed himself, "trace their pedigree far back in England & Scotland, to which let everyone ascribe the faith & merit he chooses." He went on to describe his efforts in 1776 in Virginia to bring down that "distinct set of families" who had used several legal devices to confine the inheritance of property both to the eldest son (primogeniture) and to special lines of heirs (entail) so as to form themselves "into a Patrician order, distinguished by the splendor and luxury of their establishments." Historians have often thought Jefferson exaggerated the power of primogeniture and entail and this "Patrician order." Not only was the setting aside of entails very common in Virginia; the "Patrician order" seemed not all that different from its challengers. But Jefferson clearly saw a difference, and it rankled him. The privileges of this "aristocracy of wealth," he wrote, needed to be destroyed "to make an opening for the aristocracy of virtue and talent"—of which he considered himself a prime example.

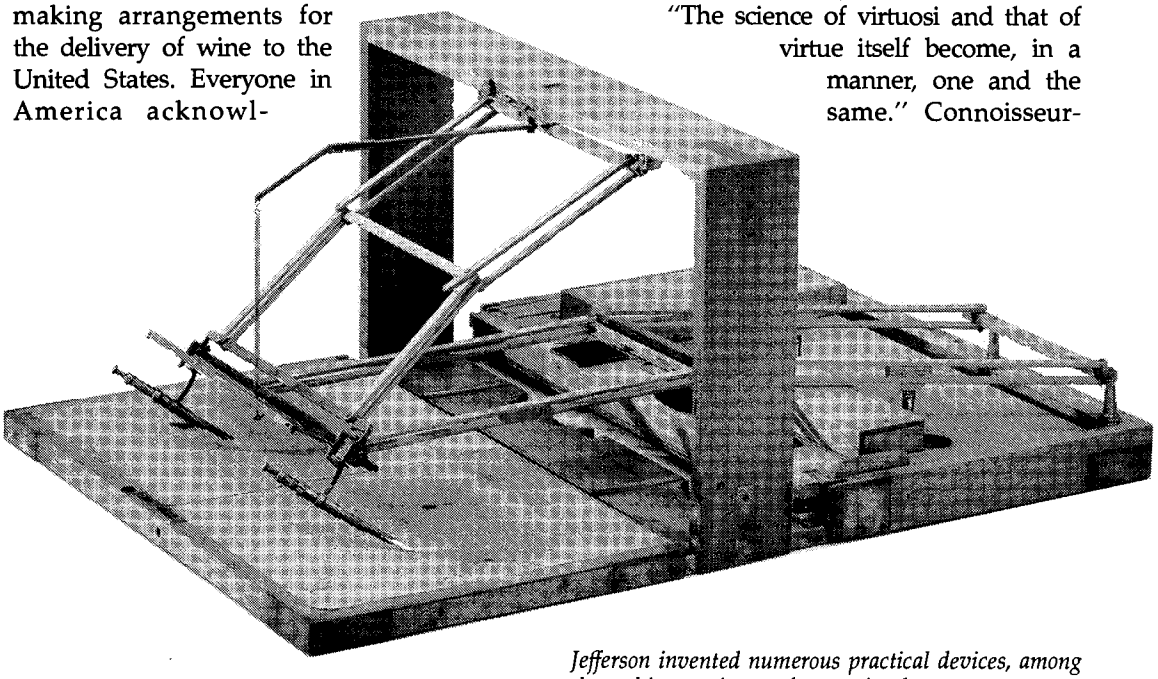
To become a natural aristocrat, one had to acquire the attributes of a natural aristocrat—enlightenment, gentility, and taste. We will never understand the young Jefferson until we appreciate the intensity and earnestness of his desire to become the most cosmopolitan, the most liberal, the most genteel, and the most enlightened gentleman in all of America. From the outset he was the sensitive provincial quick to condemn the backwardness of his fellow colonials. At college and later in studying law at Williamsburg he played the violin, learned French, and acquired the tastes and refinements of the larger world. At frequent dinners with Governor Francis Fauquier and his teachers, William Small and George Wythe, Jefferson said he "heard more good sense, more rational and philosophical conversations than in all my life besides." Looking back, he called Williamsburg "the finest school of manners and morals that ever existed in America." Although as a young man he had seen very few works of art, he knew from reading and conversation what was considered good; and in 1771 he wrote a list, ranging from the Apollo Belvedere to a Raphael cartoon, of those celebrated paintings, drawings, and sculptures that he hoped to acquire in copies. By 1782, "without having left his own country," this earnest autodidact with a voracious appetite for learning had become, as the French visitor Chevalier de Chastellux noted, "an American who . . . is at once a musician, a draftsman, an astronomer, a geometer, a physicist, a jurist and a statesman."

In time Jefferson became quite proud of his gentility, his taste, and his liberal brand of manners. In fact, he came to see himself as a kind of impresario for America, rescuing his countrymen from their "deplorable barbarism" by introducing them to the finest and most enlightened aspects of European culture. When Americans in the 1780s realized that a statue of Washington was needed, "there could be no question raised," he wrote from Paris, "as to the Sculptor who should be employed, the reputation of Monsr. Houdon of this city being unrivalled in Europe." No American could stand up to his knowledge. When Washington timidly expressed misgivings about Houdon's doing the statue in Roman style, he quickly backed down in the face of Jefferson's frown, unwilling, as he said, "to oppose my judgment to the taste of Connoisseurs."

Jefferson's excitement over the 16th-century Italian, Andrea Palladio, whose *Four Books of Architecture* was virtually unknown in America, was the excitement of the provincial discovering the cosmopolitan taste of the larger world. He became ashamed of the "gothic" Georgian architecture of his native Virginia, and he sought in Monticello to build a house that would do justice to those models that harked back to Roman antiquity. In the 1780s he badgered his Virginia colleagues into erecting as the new state capitol in Richmond a magnificent copy of the Maison Carrée, a Roman temple from the first century

A.D. at Nîmes, because he wanted an American public building that would be a model for the people's "study and imitation" and "an object and proof of national good taste." Almost singlehandedly he became responsible for making America's public buildings resemble Roman temples.

No American knew more about wine than Jefferson. During his trips around Europe in 1787–88 he spent a great deal of time investigating French, Italian, and German vineyards and wineries and making arrangements for the delivery of wine to the United States. Everyone in America acknowledged his expertise in wine, and three presidents sought his advice about what wine to serve at presidential dinners. In everything—from gardening and food to music, painting, and poetry—Jefferson wanted the latest and most enlightened in European fashion.



Jefferson invented numerous practical devices, among them this contrivance for copying letters.

It is easy to make fun of Jefferson and his parvenu behavior. But it would be a mistake to dismiss Jefferson's obsession with art and good taste merely as a trivial affectation, or as the simple posturing and putting on of airs of an American provincial who would be the perfect gentlemen. Jefferson might have been more enthusiastic about such matters than the other Revolutionary leaders, but he was by no means unique in his concern for refining his own sensibilities as well as those of other American citizens. This was a moral and political imperative of all of the Founding Fathers. To refine popular taste was in fact a moral and political imperative of all the enlightened of the 18th century.

The fine arts, good taste, and even good manners had political implications. As the English philosopher Lord Shaftesbury had preached, morality and good taste were allied: "The science of virtuosi and that of virtue itself become, in a manner, one and the same." Connoisseurship, politeness, and genteel refinement were connected with public morality and political leadership. Those who had good taste were enlightened, and those who were enlightened were virtuous.

But note: *virtuous in a modern, not an ancient, manner.* Politeness and refinement tamed and domesticated the severe classical conception of virtue. Promoting social affection was in fact the object of the civilizing process. This new social virtue was less Spartan and more Addisonian, less the harsh self-sacrifice of antiquity and more the willingness to

get along with others for the sake of peace and prosperity. Virtue in the modern manner became identified with politeness, good taste, and one's instinctive sense of morality. As the 18th-century Scottish philosopher Lord Kames said, "a taste in the fine arts goes hand in hand with the moral sense, to which indeed it is nearly allied."

Indeed, there was hardly an educated person in all of 18th-century America who did not at one time or another try to describe people's moral sense and the natural forces of love and benevolence holding society together. Jefferson's emphasis on the moral sense was scarcely peculiar to him.

This modern virtue that Jefferson and others extolled was very different from that of the ancient republican tradition. Classical virtue had flowed from the citizen's participation in politics; government had been the source of his civic consciousness and public spiritedness. But modern virtue flowed from the citizen's participation in society, not in government, which the liberal-minded increasingly saw as the source of the evils of the world. "Society," said Thomas Paine in a brilliant summary of this common enlightened separation, "is produced by our wants and government by our wickedness; the former promotes our happiness positively by uniting our affections, the latter negatively by restraining our vices. The one encourages intercourse, the other creates distinctions." It was society—the affairs of private social life—that bred sympathy and the new domesticated virtue. Mingling in drawing rooms, clubs, and coffeehouses—partaking of the innumerable interchanges of the daily comings and goings of modern life—created affection and fellow-feeling, which were all the adhesives really necessary to hold an enlightened people together. Some of Jefferson's contemporaries even argued that commerce, that traditional enemy of classical virtue, was in fact a source of modern virtue. Because it encouraged intercourse and confidence among people and nations, commerce, it was said, actually contributed to benevolence and fellow-feeling.

Jefferson could not have agreed more with this celebration of society over government. Indeed, Paine's conventional liberal division between society and government was the premise of Jefferson's political thinking—his faith in the natural ordering of society, his belief in the common moral sense of ordinary people, his idea of minimal government. "Man," said Jefferson, "was destined for society. His morality, therefore, was to be formed to this object. He was endowed with a sense of right and wrong, merely relative to this .... The moral sense, or conscience, is as much a part of a man as his leg or arm...." All human beings had "implanted in our breasts" this "love of others," this "moral instinct"; these "social dispositions" were what made democracy possible.

The importance of this domesticated modern virtue to the thinking of Jefferson and of other Americans can scarcely be exaggerated. It laid the basis for all reform movements of the 19th century and for all subsequent liberal thinking. We still yearn for a world in which everyone will love one another.

Probably no American leader took this belief in the natural sociability of people more seriously than Jefferson. His scissors-and-paste redoing of the New Testament in the early years of the 19th century stemmed from his desire to reconcile Christianity with the Enlightenment and at the same time to answer all of those critics who said that he was an enemy of all religion. Jefferson discovered that Jesus, with his prescription for each of us to love our neighbors as ourselves, actually spoke directly to the modern enlightened age. Jefferson's version of the New Testament offered a much-needed morality of social harmony for a new republican society.

Jefferson's faith in the natural sociability of people also lay behind his belief in minimal government. In fact, Jefferson would have fully understood the Western world's present interest in devolution and localist democracy.

He believed in nationhood but not the modern idea of the state. He hated all bureaucracy and all the coercive instruments of government, and he sometimes gave the impression that government was only a device by which the few attempted to rob, cheat, and oppress the many. He certainly never accepted the modern idea of the state as an entity possessing a life of its own, distinct from both rulers and ruled. For Jefferson there could be no power independent of the people, in whom he had an absolute faith.

Although he was not a modern democrat, assuming as he did that a natural aristocracy would lead the country, he had a confidence in the capacity and the virtue of the people to elect that aristocracy that was unmatched by any other of the Founding Fathers. Jefferson like the other Founding Fathers had doubts about all officials in government, even the popularly elected representatives in the lower houses of the legislatures ("173 despots would surely be as oppressive as one"); but he always thought that the people, if undisturbed by demagogues or Federalist monarchists, would eventually set matters right. It was never the people but only their elected agents that were at fault.

Not only did Jefferson refuse to recognize the structure and institutions of a modern state; he scarcely accepted the basic premise of a state, namely, its presumed monopoly of legitimate control over a prescribed territory. For him during his first presidential administration (1801–1804) the United States was really just a loosely bound confederation, not all that different from the government of the former Articles of Confederation. Hence his vision of an expanding empire of liberty over a huge continent posed no problems for his relaxed idea of a state. As long as Americans continued to believe certain things, they remained Americans. Jefferson could be remarkably indifferent to the possibility that a western confederacy might break away from the eastern United States. What did it matter? he asked in 1804. "Those of the western confederacy will be as much our children & descendants as those of the eastern."

It was Jefferson's extraordinary faith in the natural sociability of people as a substitute for the traditional force of government that made the Federalists and especially Alexander Hamilton dismiss him as a hopeless pie-in-the-sky dreamer. The idea that, "as human nature shall refine and ameliorate by the operation of a more enlightened plan," government eventually "will become useless, and Society will subsist and flourish free from its shackles" was, said Hamilton in 1794, a "wild and fatal . . . scheme," even if its "votaries" like Jefferson did not always push such a scheme to the fullest.

Jefferson and other Revolutionary leaders believed that commerce among nations in international affairs was the equivalent to affection among people in domestic affairs. Both were natural expressions of relationships that needed to be freed of monarchical obstructions and interventions. Hence in 1776 and in the years following, Jefferson and other Revolutionary idealists hoped to do for the world what they were doing for the society of the United States—change the way people related to one another. They looked forward to a rational world in which corrupt monarchical diplomacy and secret alliances, balances of power, and dynastic rivalries would be replaced by the natural ties of commerce. If the people of the various nations were left alone to exchange goods freely among themselves, then international politics would become republicanized and pacified, and war itself would be eliminated. Jefferson's and the Republican party's "candid and liberal" experiments in "peaceable coercion"—the various efforts of the United States to use nonimportation and ultimately Jefferson's disastrous Embargo of 1807–09 to change international behavior—were the inevitable consequences of this sort of idealistic republican confidence in the power of commerce.

Conventional as Jefferson's thinking might often have been, it was usually an enlightened conventional radicalism that he es-

poused. So eager was he to possess the latest and most liberal of 18th-century ideas that he could easily get carried away. He, like "others of great genius," had "a habit," as Madison gently put it in 1823, "of expressing in strong and round terms impressions of the moment." So he alone of the Founding Fathers was unperturbed by Shays's rebellion in 1786–1787. "I like a little rebellion now and then," he said. "It is like a storm in the Atmosphere." It was too bad that some people were killed, but "the tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants. It is its natural manure." Similar rhetorical exaggeration accompanied his response to the bloody excesses of the French Revolution. Because "the liberty of the whole earth" depended on the success of the French Revolution, he wrote in 1793, lives would have to be lost. "Rather than it should have failed, I would have seen half the earth desolated. Were there but an Adam & an Eve left in every country, & left free, it would be better than as it now is." Unlike Coleridge and Wordsworth and other disillusioned European liberals, Jefferson remained a champion of the French Revolution to the end.

He saw it, after all, as a movement on behalf of the rights of man that had originated in the American Revolution. And to the American Revolution and the rights of man he remained dedicated until his death. In the last letter he wrote he described the American Revolution as "the signal of arousing men to burst the chains under which monkish ignorance and superstition had persuaded them to bind themselves, and to assume the blessings and security of self-government."

Yet during Jefferson's final years in retirement these expressions of confidence in the future progress of the Enlightenment came fewer and farther between. The period between Jefferson's retirement from the presidency in 1809 and his death in 1826 was a tumultuous one in American history—marked by war with the British and Indians, a severe commercial panic, the rapid growth of democracy and evangelical religion, and the Missouri crisis over the spread of slavery. It was also not a happy time for Jefferson. To be sure, there was the Sage of Monticello relaxing among his family and friends and holding court on top of his mountain for scores of visiting admirers. There was his reconciliation with John Adams and the wonderful correspondence between the two old revolutionaries that followed. And there was his hard-fought establishment of the University of Virginia. But there was not much else to comfort him.

The world around him, the world he helped to create, was rapidly changing, and changing in ways that Jefferson found bewildering and sometimes even terrifying. The American Revolution was unfolding with radical and unexpected developments. American society was becoming more democratic and more capitalistic, and Jefferson was not prepared for either development. By the end of his life Jefferson had moments of apprehension that the American Revolution, to which he had devoted his life, was actually in danger of failing. In response his speech and action often did not accord with what we now like to think of as Jeffersonian principles. He turned inward and began spouting dogmas in a manner that many subsequent historians and biographers have found embarrassing and puzzling.

After Jefferson retired from public life in 1809, he became more narrow-minded and localist than he had ever been in his life. He had always prided himself on his cosmopolitanism, yet upon his retirement from the presidency he returned to Virginia and never left it. In fact, he virtually never again lost sight of his beloved Blue Ridge. He cut himself off from many of the current sources of knowledge of the outside world, and became, as one of his visitors George Ticknor noted, "singularly ignorant & insensible on the subjects of passing politics." He took only one newspaper, the Richmond *Enquirer*, and seemed to have no strong interest in receiving his mail. In all this he differed remarkably

from his friend and neighbor James Madison. Madison, said Ticknor, "receives multitudes of newspapers, keeps a servant always in waiting for the arrival of the Post—and takes anxious note of all passing events."

Jefferson's turn inward was matched by a relative decline in the place of Virginia in the union. Decay was everywhere in early 19th-century Virginia, and Jefferson felt it at Monticello. Despite his life-long aversion to public debts, his private debts kept mounting, and he kept borrowing, taking out new loans to meet old ones. He tried to sell his land, and when he could not he sold slaves instead. He feared that he might lose Monticello and complained constantly of his debts, but he refused to cut back on his lavish hospitality and expensive wine purchases.

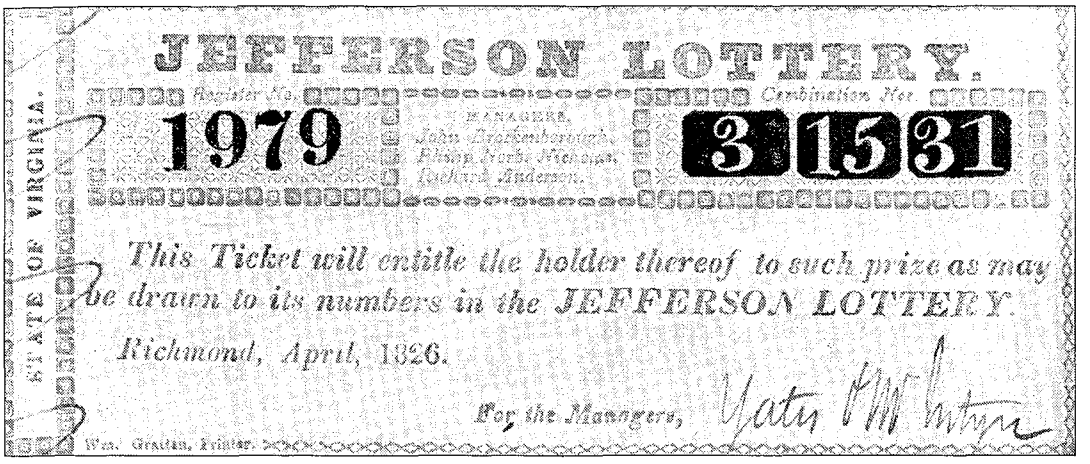
Unable to comprehend the economic forces that were transforming the country and destroying the upper South, Jefferson blamed the banks and the speculative spirit of the day for both his and Virginia's miseries. It is true that he accepted the existence of commerce and, after the War of 1812, even some limited manufacturing for the United States. But the commerce he accepted was tame and traditional stuff compared to the aggressive commerce that was taking over northern America in the early 19th century. Jefferson's idea of commerce involved little more than the sale abroad of agricultural staples—wheat, tobacco, and cotton. His commerce was not the incessant trucking and trading, the endless buying and selling with each other, that was coming to characterize the emerging northern Yankee world. That kind of dynamic domestic commerce and all the capitalistic accouterments that went with it—banks, stock markets, liquid capital, paper money—Jefferson feared and despised.

He did indeed want comforts and prosperity for his American farmers, but like some modern liberals he had little or no appreciation of the economic forces that made such prosperity and comforts possible. He had no comprehension of banks and thought that the paper money issued by banks was designed "to enrich swindlers at the expense of the honest and industrious part of the nation." He could not understand how "legerdemain tricks upon paper can produce as solid wealth or hard labor in the earth." As far as he was concerned, the buying and selling of stocks and the raising of capital were simply licentious speculation and wild gambling—all symptoms of "commercial avarice and corruption."

The ultimate culprit in the degeneration of America, he thought, was the corrupt and tyrannical course of the national government. The Missouri Crisis of 1819–1820, provoked by northern efforts to limit the spread of slavery in the West, was to Jefferson "a fire bell in the night," a threat to the union and to the Revolutionary experiment in republicanism. He believed that the federal government's proposed restriction on the right of the people of Missouri to own slaves violated the Constitution and threatened self-government. Only each state, he said, had the "exclusive right" to regulate slavery. If the federal government arrogated to itself that right, then it would next declare all slaves in the country free, "in which case all the whites within the United States south of the Potomac and Ohio must evacuate their States, and most fortunate those who can do it first."

Jefferson became a bitter critic of the usurpations of the Supreme Court and a more strident defender of states' rights than he had been even in 1798 when he penned the Kentucky Resolution justifying the right of a state to nullify federal laws. While his friend Madison remained a nationalist and upheld the right of the Supreme Court to interpret the Constitution, Jefferson lent his support to the most dogmatic, impassioned, and sectional-minded elements in Virginia, including the arch states'-rightists Spencer Roane and John Randolph. He became parochial and alarmist, and his zeal for states' rights, as even his sympathetic biographer Dumas Malone admits, "bordered on fanaticism."

For someone as optimistic and sanguine in


JEFFERSON LOTTERY.

STATE OF VIRGINIA.

Register No. 1979

MANAGERS.

Combination Nos. 3 15 31

This Ticket will entitle the holder thereof to such prize as may be drawn to its numbers in the JEFFERSON LOTTERY.

Richmond, April, 1826.

By the Managers,

Wm. Graham, Printer.

Two months before Jefferson died, admirers held a lottery to help him pay his debts.

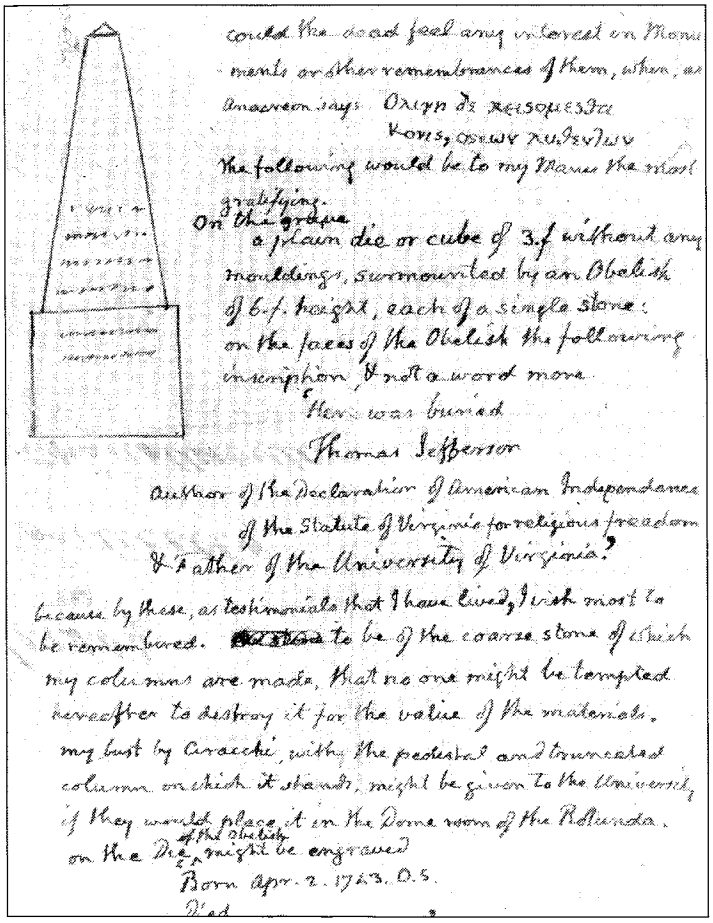
temperament as Jefferson usually was, he had many gloomy and terrifying moments in these years between 1809 and 1826. What happened? What accounts for these moments of gloom and these expressions of fanaticism? How can we explain Jefferson's uncharacteristic but increasingly frequent doubts about the future?

Certainly his personal troubles, his rising debts, the threat of bankruptcy, the fear of losing Monticello, were part of it, but they are not the whole explanation. Something more is involved in accounting for the awkwardness of his years of retirement than these outside forces, and that something seems to lie within Jefferson himself—in his principles and outlook, in his deep and long-held faith in popular democracy and the future.

No one of the Revolutionary leaders believed more strongly in progress and in the capacity of the American people for self-government than did Jefferson. And no one was more convinced that the Enlightenment was on the march against the forces of medieval barbarism and darkness, of religious superstition and enthusiasm. So sure was he of the future progress of American society that he was intellectually and emotionally unprepared for what happened in the years following his retirement from public office. He was unprepared for the democratic revolution that he himself had inspired. In the end Jefferson was victimized by his overweening confidence in the people and by his naive hopefulness in the future. The Enlightenment and the democratic revolution he had contributed so much to bring about and his own liberal and rosy temperament finally did him in.

Jefferson's sublime faith in the people and the future is the source of that symbolic power he has had for succeeding generations of Americans. He was never more American than when he told John Adams in 1816 that he liked "the dreams of the future better than the history of the past." He was always optimistic; indeed, he was a virtual Pollyanna about everything. His expectations always outran reality, whether they concerned French aristocrats who turned out to be less liberal than his friend Lafayette, or garden vegetables that never came up, or misbehaving students at the University of Virginia who violated their honor code, or an American Revolution that actually allowed people to pursue their pecuniary happiness. He was the pure American innocent. He had little understanding of man's capacity for evil and had no tragic sense whatsoever.

Through his long public career, while others were wringing their hands, Jefferson remained calm and hopeful. He knew slavery was a great evil, but he believed his genera-



Jefferson modestly requested that his epitaph record only that he was the "Author of the Declaration of American Independence, of the Statute of Virginia for religious freedom & Father of the University of Virginia."

tion could do little about it. Instead he counseled patience and a reliance on the young who would follow. When one of those younger men, Edward Coles, actually called on Jefferson in 1814 to lend his voice in the struggle against slavery, he could only offer his confidence in the future. "The hour of emancipation is advancing, in the march of time. It will come...."

It was the same with every difficulty. In one way or other he expected things to work out. In 1814 he saw his financial troubles coming at him and his household like "an approaching wave in a storm; still I think we shall live as long, eat as much, and drink as much, as if the wave had already glided under the ship. Somehow or other these things find their way out as they come in, and so I suppose they will now." Was not progress on the march, and were not science and enlightenment everywhere pushing back the forces of ignorance, superstition, and darkness? The future, he felt, was on his side and on the side of the people. A liberal democratic society would be capable of solving every problem, if not in his lifetime, then surely in the coming years.

But Jefferson lived too long, and the future and the coming generation were not what he had expected. Although he continued in his public letters, especially to foreigners, to affirm that progress and civilization were still on the march, in private he became more and more apprehensive of the future. He sensed that American society, including Virginia, might not be getting better after all, but actually going backward. The American people were not becoming more refined, more polite, and more sociable; if anything, he believed, they were more barbaric and factional. Jefferson was frightened by the divisions in the country and by the popularity of Andrew Jackson, whom he regarded as a man of violent passions and unfit for the presidency. He felt overwhelmed by the new paper-money business culture that was sweeping through the country and never appreciated how much his democratic and egalitarian principles had contributed to its rise.

Ordinary people, in whom he placed so much confidence, more certainly than his friend Madison had, were not becoming more

enlightened. In fact, superstition and bigotry, which Jefferson identified with organized religion, were actually reviving, released by the democratic revolution he had led. He was temperamentally incapable of understanding the deep popular strength of the evangelical forces that were seizing control of American culture in these early decades of the 19th century. He became what we might call a confused secular humanist in the midst of real moral majorities. While Jefferson in 1822 was still predicting that there was not a young man now alive who would not die a Unitarian, Methodists and Baptists and other evangelicals were gaining adherents by the tens of thousands in the Second Great Awakening. In response all Jefferson could do was blame the defunct New England Federalists and an equally bewildered New England clergy for spreading both capitalism and evangelical Christianity throughout the country.

Jefferson's solution to this perceived threat from New England and its "pious young monks from Harvard and Yale" was to hunker down in Virginia and build a university that would perpetuate true republican principles. "It is in our seminary," he told Madison, "that that vestal flame is to be kept alive." Yet even building the university brought sorrow and shock. The Virginia legislature was not as eager to spend money for higher education as he had expected. His support of the university became more of a political liability in the legislature than an asset.

The people in fact seemed more sectarian and less rational than they had been at the time of the Revolution. They did not seem to know who he was, what he had done. Was this the new generation on which he rested all his hopes? During the last year of his life, at a moment, says his biographer Malone, of "uneasiness that he had never known before," Jefferson was pathetically reduced to listing his contributions during 61 years of public service in order to justify a legislative favor. No wonder he sometimes felt cast off. "All, all dead!" he wrote to an old friend in 1825, "and ourselves left alone midst a new generation whom we know not, and who know not us."

These were only small cracks in his optimism, only tinges of doubt in his democratic faith, but for an innocent like him these were enough. Jefferson went further in states'-rights principles and in his fears of federal consolidation than his friend Madison did because he had such higher expectations of the Revolution and the people. He had always invested so much more of himself intellectually and emotionally in the future and in popular democracy than Madison had. Jefferson was inspired by a vision of how things could and should be. Madison tended to accept things as they were. Madison never lost his dark foreboding about the America yet to come, and he never shed his skepticism about the people and popular majorities. But Jefferson had nothing but the people and the future to fall back on; they were really all he ever believed in. That is why we remember Jefferson, and not Madison.