

*The Twenty-First Century in a Jeffersonian Light*

The teaching of history has long been dominated by the passing on of supposed answers to questions that teachers, not students, were asking. In a teacher-centered classroom that fails to challenge students to do anything beyond memorizing facts and figures from outdated textbooks, there is little wonder that students often list history as one of their least favorite subjects. Great historians, those that have been deeply touched by the events and people that came before them, would confess that history is not the finality of answering tough questions, but the gathering of information so that more and more questions can be asked. It is this intellectual engagement and questioning that has the potential to make the learning of history into an engaging skill-set as opposed to a game-show trivia contest designed to stump students and propagate teacher superiority. If educators are capable of giving up the reins and letting students both ask and answer questions, there is a possibility that students may indeed become active participants in a democratic republic that relies on their intelligence and engagement.

If the teaching of United States' history begins where the young country itself began, with the ratification of the Declaration of Independence, then it is only fitting if the Declaration's chief author provides the entry point into the studying of the people and events that have shaped United States' history. To study Thomas Jefferson in the classroom is to introduce a personality that is fraught with controversy, uncertainty, and a variety of moral dilemmas that are accessible to secondary school students. Themes that dominate and define the next two-hundred plus years of United States' history, racism; sexism; gender equity; debt; war; political parties; power; constitutionality; slavery; westward expansion, to name a few, are elements that present themselves in great detail during the public and private life of America's third president. Thomas Jefferson, like American history, is inconsistent and conflicted; there are times of shining brilliance and there are times of great disappointment in

Jefferson's life, as there are dark days and celebrations in the history of the American people. Because of this, Thomas Jefferson serves as the symbolic starting point and a great figure to compare the successes and shortcomings of every subsequent generation of American leaders. If, throughout an entire United States' history curriculum, students can determine how much closer the country is to fulfilling Jefferson's assertion that *all men are created equal*, they can demonstrate an understanding of change over time while collecting evidence and applying knowledge in a meaningful and insightful way.

Thomas Jefferson is certainly not the cause of the American Revolution, but like many of the figures that dominate the pantheon of American history, the celebration of Jefferson is certainly a consequence of the success of the free world's most famous revolution. So while it would be naïve to give Jefferson more credit than his founding brethren, Jefferson's authorship of the Declaration thrust him into prominence at the early stages of the American Revolution and Jefferson's legacy has only grown as the mythology of the Declaration has intensified in subsequent generations. The words "all men are created equal" laid the foundation and served as the rallying cry for every subsequent generation following the American Revolution. It is this statement that can be used to examine every other time period in American history; the words "all men are created equal" have been challenged, supported, and questioned continuously since their inception. It is this statement that can serve as the benchmark to measure every subsequent success and failure of the American dream.

To start, classroom teachers and students can begin by examining the statement itself at its time of inception. Great debates and discussions can take place by taking a short glimpse into the lives of the Founding Fathers that write and approve this hallowed document that declares that *all men are created equal*. These elite white males, some of whom are slave owners, establish a nation on this principle while simultaneously restricting *the pursuit of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness* to large numbers of the population – women, children, slaves, and Native Americans for example. Whether you are

interested in examining the founder's views on race, sex, or property requirements, the surviving papers of these men, and sometimes women, survive and provide a great primary account of the opinions and events of the time period. Technology has made these readily available for anyone with internet access through searchable databases like *Founders Online* and *The American Memory Project*. These revolutionary projects have the potential to dramatically change classrooms as these resources become more readily available, teachers will have the advantage of being able to rely less on the textbook interpretation of events and can challenge students to probe into the thoughts and writings of some of the United States' most celebrated figures, those that are directly responsible for establishing principles and policies that continue to dictate American lives today.

The Founding Generation is not alone in its contradictions and heated debates. As the United States inched closer and closer to Civil War, debates over whether *all men are created equal* remained at the forefront of political and social discussions and created the most divisive period in American history. Like Jefferson, America was not sure how to deal with issues of race. If teachers have successfully created a foundation using Jefferson as the bar to measure American successes, students should now be able to view the events of Antebellum and Civil War America with a lens that would certainly be conflicted about the time period, as evidenced in Jefferson's late letters regarding the Missouri Compromise. It is too easy for students and teachers to stand on twenty-first century pedestals and sling rocks at the heroes of the past. Instead, students can evaluate Abraham Lincoln's views on race by looking at the Lincoln-Douglas debates and comparing his views on race with Jefferson's quasi-scientific assertions in *Query 14 of Notes on the State of Virginia*. This sets students up for comparisons; how does the *Great Emancipator* compare to the Virginia slave owner? How does the man responsible for declaring that *all men are created equal* look standing next to Honest Abe. These are questions that students can sufficiently answer if given the resources necessary to formulate responsible opinions and engage in intelligent conversations. After all, the tools that are necessary to interpret history are the

tangible skills that we want students to learn, not just the ability to memorize facts and opinions deemed valuable by the educational powers-that-be. The reality is that historians and educators cannot reach a consensus for Jefferson or Lincoln's racial attitudes, so why should teachers expect their students to simply "learn" the truth – there is no truth and that is how and why history can be interesting to students. Is the abolition of slavery enough to save Lincoln's reputation or will he be voted out of the American hall of fame, because, like Jefferson, students chose to crucify him despite his assertion that *all men are created equal*?

To determine whether or not the American dream is truly being fulfilled, students can continue to collect evidence through the Gilded Age up to the 1920s. Examining change over time, students can now decide whether or not the population of the United States is any closer to fulfilling Jefferson's rallying words. As the disparity of wealth expands, African-Americans continue to be disenfranchised, and women struggle to earn the right to vote, would Jefferson be proud of the country he helped establish or would he be too shocked to even imagine the changes? This alternative lens gives students a chance to be critical in a safe manner that allows them to postulate on what Jefferson *might* have believed as opposed to what they may think is right or wrong. By separating their own beliefs and using Jefferson as a go-between, students might be more comfortable to make guesses and assertions based on the information they have collected than if it were just their own thoughts on the subject. Jefferson then becomes a safety net that not only gives students a comfortable classroom setting but also allows them to develop a historical approach to challenging subjects that test a number of moral, ethical, political, and social dilemmas; if their knowledge of Jefferson was firmly established at the onset of the course, this biographical lens can serve as a great tool for them to measure progress while also being critical of any number of events and themes.

Arguably the most controversial administration in presidential history, the Franklin Roosevelt years would be a great case study in Jeffersonian thinking and allow students a plethora of topics to examine through the eyes of Jefferson. By utilizing in-depth biography to compare and contrast both Roosevelt and Jefferson, students can determine whether or not Roosevelt was doing everything possible to ensure that the pursuit of life, liberty, and happiness are available, or whether he was exercising extra-constitutional powers in the Jeffersonian fashion that produced the Louisiana Purchase. Is it possible that both men did great things despite exercising powers not outlined in Article Two of the Constitution? Possibly. Students can use hindsight and insight from the lives of both men to determine whether or not these decisions were indeed positive steps forward in the struggle to ensure that *all men are created equal*.

Huge steps were made in the subsequent decades; the 1950s and 60s marked some of the most progressive years for African-Americans since the 1860s. Men like Abraham Lincoln and Thomas Jefferson were celebrated as Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, and Rosa Parks became prominent figures in the battle for equality in the United States. The same questions can be asked in the classroom, are we any closer to ensuring that *all men are created equal*? Is this the world that Jefferson hoped would eventually be achieved? Are there still things that need to be addressed? Race remains a hotbed issue and students know a great deal about this subject; if teachers let them formulate opinions and ideas, students will surely surprise educators with their strong opinions and ideas. The biographies and auto-biographies of prominent African-Americans like King, X, and Parks can take the forefront and serve as sources to measure the progress that the United States has made in the nearly two-hundred years since Jefferson lent his pen to the *Declaration of Independence*.

Issues of race, equality, sex, power, party-politics, and a variety of other issues that Jefferson dealt with are still alive today. The election of an African-American president in 2008, and his

subsequent re-election in 2012, solidified for many the realization that Jefferson's words may have finally been realized on a large-scale. While President Barack Obama's election is a positive, most people who are critical and sensitive to issues of race will remind us that the United States is still far from realizing the ideas cemented in the *Declaration of Independence*. In the wake of recent court decisions wrought with racial tensions and a country that is still nervous about the Muslim world that many hold responsible for terrorist attacks on American soil, there is still work that must be done. Would Jefferson be excited about an African-American president? Does the tree of liberty truly need to be watered with the blood of tyrants, and if so, would well directed terrorism be acceptable in the utopian vision that Jefferson imagined? Jefferson embodies the reality that absolute truths simply do not exist in history, and if teachers are willing to challenge students to draw conclusions for themselves and to truly examine historical figures, Jefferson can serve as the quintessential example of grey. In the current academic climate, it is impossible to use a single event, whether positive or negative, to define the legacy of an individual. If educators decide to use slavery as the only point of study, then Jefferson will certainly appear to students as a racist hypocrite, but if teachers present a flip-side that consists of the Virginia Statute of Religious Freedom and his work on the Declaration of Independence, a multi-faceted human being emerges, and that is the type of person that students want to study. If history remains an archaic form of question-and-answer, then students will continue to be bored and uninterested, but if students can challenge preconceived ideas and look eye-to-eye with America's hallowed figures, maybe then they will see that history can be a meaningful subject worth studying.