

Teaching U.S. History through Biography: Thomas Jefferson

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American civil rights leader Julian Bond, in an interview with documentary filmmaker Ken Burns, said, “we owe thanks to people like Thomas Jefferson, who both show us what we could be and who show us what we’re not.”¹ The complexity of Jefferson's identity exemplifies both the best and the worst aspects of the collective history of the United States of America. Jefferson was an advocate of radical political change, yet in many of his personal views and convictions, he remained static and traditional. He was an innovator and representative of the greatest aims of the Enlightenment, while simultaneously a representative of a Virginian aristocracy that benefitted and prospered from the enslavement and subjugation of human beings. He extolled the virtues of avoiding arguments and debates, but was at times unfazed--even supportive--of war and mob violence. He was an advocate of fiscal responsibility, yet he could not reasonably manage his own finances and lavish spending habits.

An historical examination of Thomas Jefferson's public and personal identity provides students at the secondary level with a unique opportunity for individual and collective self-examination and reflection. Jefferson exists in American history and American popular culture as both hero and villain simultaneously, so there is an almost dramatic element to his life that is both engaging and controversial. Because of the paradoxical nature of his character, Jefferson is a prime example of the inner conflicts and outright contradictions that all humans struggle to reconcile. What makes Jefferson an ideal choice for teaching through biography is that his character in many ways mirrors the realities of U.S. History. Not only is he a polarizing, romantic, iconic, influential, and complex person—which makes his character that much more fascinating—but his

¹ <http://www.pbs.org/jefferson/archives/interviews/frame.htm>

identity provides a great opportunity for students to use a personal, human lens to examine its history.

As teachers, we have a responsibility to challenge our students to go beyond merely recalling and identifying significant historical proper nouns. Students must be challenged to not only understand and make sense of history, but to identify and develop their own methods of value ascription regarding historical interpretation. In order to achieve this end, teachers must connect the traditionally important dates, events, locations, and people to what students feel is important in their own lives and communities. Establishing this connection allows students to connect personally with their learning and grasp history's more subtle nuances. Emotions, actions, and ideas that have lasting impacts on the world can be more readily accessed, understood, and appreciated when students feel a personal connection to what they are learning.

Many middle school curriculums across the nation emphasize the importance of students discovering and examining their own individual identity. Given the egocentric nature of children at this age, designing curriculum that emphasizes explorations of individual identity serves to better engage the students in their learning. My own experience as a teacher of eighth grade U.S History has shown me that it is very difficult for students at this age to identify with, and make personal connections to this historical time period. As students progress in their studies from the latter 19th and into the 20th and 21st centuries, teachers have the luxury of instructional aids such as photographs, audio, and video that are non-existent in early U.S. History. The challenge then, to the History teacher at the secondary level, is to utilize the historical resources that do exist from this

time period in a manner that allows students to feel some sort of personal connection or investment in what they are learning.

One way to accomplish this is by employing biographies as a lens with which to study historical figures and events. Biographies not only offer an abundance of historical data, but they provide their readers with examples and evidence of the universal realities of the human condition. Textbooks provide students with breadth but not depth, and primary sources often only provide a glimpse into a singular time period in an individual's life. For students at the secondary level, biographies are easily the best method for facilitating the stated goal of establishing personal connections with the past. Biography, in conjunction with primary sources, can allow students to really feel as if they are getting to know the true identity of a historical figure. Biographies provide an opportunity for meaningful analysis of both historical events, and the people that were driving (or, being driven by) them.

The paradoxes that mark Jefferson's life range from controversial and inflammatory, to predictable and understandable; and they allow students to see that Jefferson, like all humans, is not without flaws. Perhaps the most controversial and engaging of these paradoxes is Jefferson's views on race and slavery. In Query 14 from *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Jefferson writes, "The improvement of the blacks in body and mind, in the first instance of their mixture with the whites, has been observed by every one, and proves that their inferiority is not the effect merely of their condition of life."² Jefferson clearly was of the mind that Africans and African Americans were

² <http://etext.virginia.edu/etcbin/toccer-new2?id=JefVirg.sgm&images=images/modeng&data=/texts/english/modeng/parsed&tag=public&part=14&division=div1>

naturally inferior to whites. Yet, Jefferson also writes in Query 18 of *Notes*, “Indeed I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just: that his justice cannot sleep for ever: that considering numbers, nature and natural means only, a revolution of the wheel of fortune, an exchange of situation, is among possible events: that it may become probable by supernatural interference! The Almighty has no attribute which can take side with us in such a contest.”³ Jefferson was clearly willing to acknowledge that slavery was morally wrong, but was confident neither in the natural abilities of African Americans nor in the potential for a peaceful resolution to the slavery question.

Jefferson once famously wrote to James Madison in 1789, “the earth...belongs to the living.”⁴ This belief in the right and responsibility of subsequent generations to effect moral, social, and political development allowed Jefferson to maintain at least a veneer of moral absolutism over slavery. But as Jefferson became more and more overwhelmed by debt in his later life, he became less critical of slavery as an institution, and more wary of what he saw as the inevitable violence that it would bring the United States. In 1820, Jefferson wrote to John Holmes, “I considered [The Missouri Compromise] at once as the knell of the Union. It is hushed, indeed, for the moment. But this is a reprieve only, not a final sentence. A geographical line, coinciding with a marked principle, moral and political, once conceived and held up to the angry passions of men, will never be obliterated; and every new irritation will mark it deeper and deeper...But as it is, we have

³ <http://etext.virginia.edu/etcbin/toccer-new2?id=JefVirg.sgm&images=images/modeng&data=/texts/english/modeng/parsed&tag=public&part=18&division=div1>

⁴ <http://etext.virginia.edu/etcbin/toccer-new2?id=JefLett.sgm&images=images/modeng&data=/texts/english/modeng/parsed&tag=public&part=81&division=div1>

the wolf by the ears, and we can neither hold him, nor safely let him go. Justice is in one scale, and self-preservation in the other.”⁵

To some, the mere fact that Jefferson owned slaves, yet famously penned, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal...” unequivocally demonstrates that he is a hypocrite of the worst kind. This contradiction, however, is not exclusive to Jefferson, and is one of the most obvious parallels of his life to the course of U.S. History. Like the generation of U.S. politicians immediately following him, Jefferson was content to “kick the can down the road” when it came to slavery. Even after the passage of the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments to the Constitution, the United States Government repeatedly failed to protect and uphold the rights of African Americans, and racial injustice continues to plague our society to this day. The United States’ treatment of African Americans, in some ways, almost reflects portions of Jefferson’s thought: slavery became immoral and wrong, yet racial prejudice and segregation were accepted and protected.

For students at the secondary level, examining Jefferson’s views on race and slavery present a fantastic opportunity for both discussion and debate. While he clearly was backward (by contemporary moral standards) in his racial views, he was in many ways representative of a more progressive view on slavery in 18th and 19th Century Virginia. Students can determine their own conclusions about Jefferson’s motives and intentions based on their understanding of Jefferson’s character, and through accessing the plethora of primary source documents that he left to posterity. Utilizing biographies

⁵ <http://etext.virginia.edu/etcbin/toccer-new2?id=JefLett.sgm&images=images/modeng&data=/texts/english/modeng/parsed&tag=public&part=258&division=div1>

of Jefferson to teach students about both his life and its parallels to the history of the United States is an ideal method for engaging students, and for helping them to make meaningful connections between the past and the present.