

## Thomas Jefferson and Race

This lesson examines the complexity of the racial views of Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson, who is credited with creating the standards that have continued to guide Americans, had conflicting views on slavery and race. Some historians have argued that his views were typical of many 18<sup>th</sup> century men, both non-slaveholders and slaveholders. Other historians have blamed Jefferson for the racial problems that have plagued America. This lesson will examine, through classroom debate using a variety of sources, Jefferson's views on race and determine if the homage paid to Jefferson is warranted or not.

This lesson is designed for a sophomore United States History I Honors class. This lesson is also used to develop several important Habits of the Mind.

## History Habits of the Mind

<http://www.nche.net/habitsofthemind>

Several of the History's Habits of the Mind give important reasons for this lesson:

1. A focus on Thomas Jefferson's 18<sup>th</sup> century views and 21<sup>st</sup> century racial views helps students **grasp the significance of the past in shaping the present.**
2. A focus on using primary sources to examine Jefferson's racial views helps students **perceive past events as they might have been experienced by people of the time, with historical empathy rather than present-mindedness.**
3. A critical examination of primary and secondary sources will help students **discern differences between evidence and assertion to frame useful and appropriate questions about the past.**
4. Use of several scholarly secondary sources will allow students to **recognize that history is an evolving narrative constructed from available sources, cogent inferences and changing interpretations.**
5. By engaging in debate this lesson will help students **engage in patient reflection and constant reexamination of past and present.**

## Guiding Questions:

1. How can we reconcile Thomas Jefferson's views on race with the words he wrote in the Declaration of Independence?
2. Should Thomas Jefferson be judged using 21<sup>st</sup> century standards?
3. How common were Thomas Jefferson's racial views in the 18<sup>th</sup> century? Does this exonerate Jefferson?
4. Does Jefferson deserve the blame for America's racial problems?
5. Should Americans stop honoring Jefferson and the Founding "Guys"?

**Lesson Objectives:****Content Objectives:**

Students will

1. Identify the range of racial views of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.
2. Analyze the racial views of Thomas Jefferson.
3. Critically evaluate the racial views of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and Thomas Jefferson.

**Skill Objectives:**

Students will:

1. Construct an argument defending and opposing Jefferson's racial views.
2. Debate the veracity of Jefferson's words in the Declaration of Independence in light of his stated views on race.
3. Research typical views on race of 18<sup>th</sup> century Americans.
4. Assess the impact of Jefferson's racial views on American history.

**RESOURCES:**

1. Power point presentation on slavery in the early Republic – this power point can be accessed at <http://fc.dfrcec.com/~mvieira@bishopconnolly.com>
2. A selection of Jefferson's letters – see bibliography.
3. A selection of historian interviews – see bibliography.
4. Several scholarly treatments of Jefferson, slavery and race in the 18<sup>th</sup> century – see bibliography.

**INSTRUCTIONAL PROCESS:****Engagement:**

1. Present lecture on slavery in the early Republic (power point)
2. Ask students if someone's racial views cancels the good someone has done.

**Instruction:**

3. The Historical Context:

Thomas Jefferson's only book, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, was written in 1781 and published privately in 1784. In *The Notes*, Jefferson outlined his views on race. Jefferson begins his discussion on race after a description of failed legislation in Virginia that would have eventually emancipated young, enslaved African Americans.

Jefferson compares the white and black race in stark terms. Many have argued that Jefferson's views were typical of 18<sup>th</sup> century white men – slaveholder and non-slaveholder. However, in 1776, in the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson defined the standards that have continued to guide American. In the

Declaration, Jefferson writes “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these, are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

The question is how do we reconcile the words of the Declaration of Independence, with these words from *Notes on the State of Virginia*, “I advance it therefore as a suspicion only, that blacks, whether originally a distinct race, or made distinct by time and circumstances, are inferior to whites in the endowments both of body and mind. It is not against experience to suppose, that species of the same genus, or varieties of the same species, may possess different qualifications.” Thus he made clear that he believed that blacks were inferior to whites.

Jefferson’s racial views moved him to favor a limited policy of emancipation. But he strongly believed that freed slaves would have to be colonized outside America. He believed, like many in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, that the white race and black race could not co-exist. He feared freed black would seek retribution. He emancipated only a small number of his many slaves.

The questions are: Do Jefferson’s view on race cancel his words in the Declaration of Independence? Because of his views we should stop paying homage to him?

4. Present the debate resolution:

**“Resolved: Due to Thomas Jefferson’s 18<sup>th</sup> century racial views Americans in the 21<sup>st</sup> century should cease to honor him among the Founding Fathers.**

5. Set teams, format, and rules for debate and explain scoring rubric.
6. Class time break down:
  - \*Day One: Introduction in historical context and debate procedures
  - \*Day Two and Three: Teams research and prepare arguments
  - \*Day Four: Class Debate
  - \*Day Five: Feedback and Discussion

## **THE DEBATE:**

### **Teams:**

1. There will be 2 teams. Teacher will select the teams
2. Each team will select its speakers (4)
3. All team members must participate in the research and formulation of the team’s position.
4. A coin toss will determine which team will argue in the affirmative and negative.

### Format and Rules:

1. The debate will consist of 8 speeches. The first 4 speeches are called **constructive speeches**, because the teams are perceived as laying out their most important arguments during these speeches. The last 4 speeches are called **rebuttals**, because the teams are expected to extend and apply arguments that have already been made, rather than make new arguments and provide argumentation to discredit arguments of the other side.
2. The time limits for each speech is as follows:

|         |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |
|---------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| Speech: | 1AC    | 1NC    | 2AC    | 2NC    | 1NR    | 1AR    | 2NR    | 2AR    |
| Time:   | 8 min. | 8 min. | 8 min. | 8 min. | 4 min. | 4 min. | 4 min. | 4 min. |

(A=Affirmative, N=Negative, C=Constructive, R=Rebuttal)

3. Participants are expected to uphold the highest standards of personal and intellectual integrity. No student may use information for use in the debate not verifiable from historical sources.

### Assessment:

\*At the conclusion of the debate, students will be asked to submit a 3 page paper stating their individual position on the debate resolution.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY:**

### **Primary Sources:**

#### ***The Declaration of Independence***

The following writings of Thomas Jefferson can be found in Merrill Peterson, *Thomas Jefferson Writings* (Library of America, NY, 1984). Copies of these letters will be provided to each group.

1. *Notes on the State of Virginia* pp. 288-289; 264-270
2. "A Bill Declaring Who Shall Be Deemed Citizens of this Commonwealth," pp. 376-375
3. "Fire Bell in the Night," pp. 1443-1445
4. "A Plan for Emancipation," pp. 1484-1487
5. "Hope for Our Black Brethren," pp. 982-983
6. "African Colonization," pp.1096-1099
7. "Nune Dimittis on Slavery," pp. 1516
8. "Emancipation and the Younger Generation," pp. 1343-1346
9. "The Negro Race," pp. 1202
10. "On American Degeneracy," pp. 799-802

### **Secondary Sources:**

Bernstein, R.B., *Thomas Jefferson* (Oxford University Press: NY, 2003). Chapters 3-4,8,10 and Epilogue

Berlin, Ira, *Generations of Captivity: A History of African-Americans Slaves* (Harvard University Press: 2003). Chapter 3

Brodie, Fawn, *Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History* (Norton: NY, 1974). Chapters 9, 20-21

Davis, David Brion, *INHUMAN BONDAGE: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World* (Oxford University Press: NY, 2006). Chapters 6-7

Egerton, Douglas R., *Death or Liberty: African Americans and Revolutionary America* (Oxford University Press: NY, 2009). Chapter 9

Ellis, Joseph E., *American Sphinx: The Character of Thomas Jefferson* (Knopf: NY, 1997). Pages 144-152; 264-272

Fehrenbacher, Don E., (completed and edited by Ward M. McAfee), *The Slaveholding Republic* (Oxford University Press: NY, 2001). Chapters 2,5,9-10

Gordon-Reed, Annette, *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: An American Controversy* (University of Virginia Press: Charlottesville, 1999). Chapters 4-7

Mason, Matthew, *Slavery and Politics in the Early Republic* (University of North Carolina Press: Chapel Hill, 2006). Chapter 1,6-8

Morgan, Edmund, S., *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (Norton: NY, 1975; new edition 2005). Chapters 15-18

Waldstreicher, David, *Slavery's Constitution: From Revolution to Ratification* (Hill and Wang: NY, 2009). Chapters 1-4

**Historian Interviews:**

The following historian interviews can be found at [www.pbs.org/jefferson/archives/interviews](http://www.pbs.org/jefferson/archives/interviews):

1. Julian Bond
2. Daniel Boorstin
3. Andy Burstein
4. Joe Ellis
5. Paul Finkleman
6. John Hope Franklin
7. James Horton
8. Clay Jenkinson
9. Merrill Peterson
10. Gore Vidal
11. George Will
12. Garry Willis

## Class Debate Rubric

| Category                | 5   | 4  | 3  | 2   | 1  | Totals |
|-------------------------|---|--|--|---|--|--------|
| Respect for Other Team  | All statements, body language, and responses were respectful and were in appropriate language.  | Statements and responses were respectful and used appropriate language, but once or twice body language was not.                   | Most statements and responses were respectful and in appropriate language, but there was one sarcastic remark.                       | Statements, responses and/or body language were borderline appropriate. Some sarcastic remarks. | Statements, responses and/or body language were consistently not respectful. |        |
| Information             | All information presented in this debate was clear, accurate and thorough.  | Most information presented in this debate was clear, accurate and thorough.  | Most information presented in the debate was clear and accurate, but was not usually thorough.                                       | Some information was accurate, but there were some minor inaccuracies.                          | Information had some major inaccuracies OR was usually not clear.            |        |
| Rebuttal                | All counter-arguments were accurate, relevant and strong.   | Most counter-arguments were accurate, relevant, and strong.  | Most counter-arguments were accurate and relevant, but several were weak.  | Some counter arguments were weak and irrelevant.  | Counter-arguments were not accurate and/or relevant.                         |        |
| Use of Facts/Statistics | Every major point was well supported with several relevant facts, statistics and/or examples.   | Every major point was adequately supported with relevant facts, statistics and/or examples.  | Every major point was supported with facts, statistics and/or examples, but the relevance of some was questionable.                  | Some points were supported well, others were not.   | Every point was not supported.   |        |
| Organization            | All arguments were clearly tied to an idea (premise) and organized in a tight, logical fashion.   | Most arguments were clearly tied to an idea (premise) and organized in a tight, logical fashion.                                   | All arguments were clearly tied to an idea (premise) but the organization was sometimes not clear or logical.                        | Arguments were not tied well to an idea.  | Arguments were not tied to an idea at all.                                   |        |
| Understanding of Topic  | The team clearly understood the topic in-depth and presented their information forcefully and convincingly.                             | The team clearly understood the topic in-depth and presented their information with ease.  | The team seemed to understand the main points of the topic and presented those with ease.  | The team seemed to understand the main points of the topic, but didn't present with ease.       | The team did not show an adequate understanding of the topic.                |        |
| Presentation Style      | Team consistently used gestures, eye contact, tone of voice and a level of enthusiasm in a way that kept the attention of the audience. | Team usually used gestures, eye contact, tone of voice and a level of enthusiasm in a way that kept the attention of the audience. | Team sometimes used gestures, eye contact, tone of voice and a level of enthusiasm in a way that kept the attention of the audience. | One or more members of the team had a presentation style that did not keep attention.           | The team's presentation style did not keep the attention of the audience.    |        |
| <b>Totals:</b>          |   |  |  |   |  |        |

Source: [course1.winona.edu/shatfield/air/classdebate.pdf](http://course1.winona.edu/shatfield/air/classdebate.pdf)