

## A Late-in-life Convert: Why I Finally Decided Thomas Jefferson is a “Good Man”

By Bernard J. Yanelli

### *Introduction*

In his book entitled *A Call to Heroism: Renewing America’s Vision of Greatness*, Peter Gibbon encourages teachers, among others, to see beyond the intense cynicism of our age and find ways to celebrate heroes and the concept of the heroic. As part of his argument, he provides William James’s pithy apology for a liberal arts education: “it should help you to know a good man when you see him.” While hardly a startling pronouncement, James’s insight grows more profound the longer one ponders it. In my case, such pondering, along with attending a National Endowment for the Humanities (N.E.H.) Institute that Gibbon led on Thomas Jefferson’s life and character, finally brought me to a conclusion I have fought for many years: Thomas Jefferson is a “good man.” One might ask: “who cares how he’s perceived today?” My answer: we all should—his legacy is simply that important to the way we see ourselves as Americans. Many historians would agree that Jefferson has been lionized and demonized more than any other American in history, but an objective look at his life and writings shows that he is neither a saint nor sinner. What he is, rather, is a complex man who remains extremely relevant and worth admiring, but, alas, not worth idolizing...Heroic in some ways, tragic in others.

I believe Jefferson remains relevant for two reasons: one, he made enormous contributions to U.S. (and world) history; and, two, his extraordinary life manifested some of the best and worst attributes of the human condition. He was brilliant, yet seemingly naïve in his views toward human nature and economics; extremely polite, yet often cunning and deceitful toward his most ardent political enemies; a good listener, yet intransigent when he disagreed with another’s viewpoint; a complex thinker, yet someone who oversimplified complicated

issues when it suited him to do so; a champion against public debt, yet functionally bankrupt when he died; a great moral teacher, yet someone who held slaves his entire adult life. This list goes on.

Two quotations from the New Testament's Book of James provide some general insight into Jefferson's character. On the positive side there is the famous dictum, "Faith without works is dead." Of all the Founding Fathers, Jefferson rightfully gets credit for having more faith in the American people and America's ongoing experiment with a republican form of government than any other. Some historians point to the eloquent words in the Declaration of Independence and consider his optimistic vision for our future—and the universality of that vision—as his greatest legacy. I disagree. I actually find his optimism a bit Panglossian at times.

I am much more impressed by the many noteworthy "works" Jefferson engaged in that demonstrated, in a practical way, his faith in the common man. Not the least of these works were his Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom, which helped separate church and state in this country, and his "Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge," an educational bill that sought to provide a form of free education to all Virginians (which the Virginia legislature repeatedly voted down). He also founded the University of Virginia as a public "academic village" and passed laws against primogeniture and entail to break up the monopoly of what he called the "pseudo-aristocracy." Each of these measures ultimately helped bring about a more democratic American society, but, sadly, most Americans know little about them. As such, most Americans are limited in their ability to assess Jefferson's many contributions. In my case, I consider Jefferson much more than a great thinker, writer, and idealist; he was a practical dreamer, a "doer" of the first order.

A far less sanguine passage from the Book of James also has some relevance for assessing Jefferson. It states that we should beware of a “double-minded man,” a man who is “unstable in all he does.” Jefferson was by no means an unstable man, but, as noted, he was double-minded in several important ways. The most obvious way was that he held slaves and benefited significantly from their labor, while also earning praise for being the great champion of liberty and equality. In his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, for instance, he displays a deep-seated racism, referring to slaves as “inferior.” Conversely, in some of his other writings, he shows an intense disdain for the institution of slavery and tries to end it. His double-mindedness in this regard continues to haunt Jefferson’s legacy, and it should.

Jefferson also had the capacity to seemingly delude himself when convenient to do so. His letter to Benjamin Hawkins in 1803 regarding how we should handle relations with Native Americans provides a case in point: “While [Native Americans] are learning to do better on less land, our increasing numbers will be calling for more land, and thus a coincidence of interests will be produced between those who have lands to spare, and want other necessaries, and those who have such necessaries to spare and want lands. This commerce, then, will be good for both.” From this and other letters found in *Jefferson Writings*, edited by Merrill Peterson, it appears that Jefferson actually believed what he wrote here about a mutually beneficial relationship with Native Americans. To the modern ear, of course, his argument seems absurd, especially given the horrific treatment of Native Americans during the remainder of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

In spite of Jefferson’s well-noted inconsistency toward slavery, and his proclivity to think in black and white terms irrespective of the complexity of the issue, he continues to be admired by people around the world. Until recently, I was simply not one of them. I would now like to explore why I learned to dislike Jefferson and why I changed my mind.

## *Disliking Jefferson*

I found it quite easy to dislike Jefferson when I was younger. Growing up in New England, I was a John Adams man all the way. History books, I thought, tended to give Jefferson too much credit and Adams too little. During my junior year in high school, in fact, I won the most important essay contest in our school, asserting that Adams had been shortchanged by historians and that he was every bit important as Jefferson. On a personal level, I could relate to the scrappy Adams, eventually coming to think of him as the quintessential underdog, much like my beloved Boston Red Sox.

My general dislike of Jefferson only increased when I went to college. There I read accounts of his life by the likes of Dumas Malone and Merrill Peterson, and I found their analyses tainted by an obvious bias, which only served to reinforce my negative attitude. Both men, I thought, seemed more intent on protecting the myths and legend surrounding Jefferson's legacy rather than revealing that his long shadow should earn him both great praise and some genuine criticism.

In hindsight, I realize that my charges of bias were well-founded, but that there were some larger forces at play, forces that I had not fully considered. Growing up in the 1960s and 1970s, I now realize was to grow up in a period of transition, where the rules of conduct and spirit of the times were rapidly shifting. I never stopped to think how much my fledging worldview was being influenced by the intensely cynical age that slowly enveloped me. Sooner or later, all authority figures such as Jefferson slowly lost their luster, and men like Malone and Peterson mostly came off as sycophants. In this new age of cynicism, knocking Jefferson off his pedestal was easy to do.

In college, I studied economics and slowly became a fan of Alexander Hamilton. Over time, he even came to supplant John Adams, my boyhood hero. Anyone who studies the economic history of our country has to admire Hamilton's brilliance. Even by today's standards, his plans in the early 1790s for a national bank, debt assumption, and a protective tariff seem entirely logical, even prescient. By contrast, many of Jefferson's economic plans seem naïve, provincial. I was especially appalled by his moronic Embargo Act of 1807, a move that brought commerce in this country to a virtual standstill. It was actually through my study of U.S. economic history that I became increasingly fascinated by the deep-seated tension between Hamilton and Jefferson. They disagreed, it seemed, on just about everything.

A few years after college, I joined the Bank of Boston and became an international banker, a profession Jefferson would most certainly have loathed. Founded in 1784, the Bank of Boston was older than the U.S. Constitution and roughly as old as Hamilton's Bank of New York. How impressive, I thought—not only did Hamilton serve as the first Secretary of the Treasury, but he also helped found a bank that still exists. The more I admired Hamilton, the more I disliked Jefferson.

### *A Gradual Change of Heart*

In my late 30s, I decided to fulfill a lifelong dream and become a teacher. I thus went back to graduate school to earn a masters degree and a teaching certification in history. While doing so, I began to read a great deal about America's founding, including the book *American Sphinx* by Joseph Ellis, a book that, while still biased, gave a more balanced view of Jefferson than anything I had read before. As part of my graduate studies, I also came across a theory that connected Plato's "noble lie" (which asserts that the founding of all societies is built on some type of concealed lie) to the Declaration of Independence, which, on some level, seems to gloss

over the inherent tension between liberty and equality. Some historians, I learned, assert that Jefferson was trying to “pull a fast one” by intentionally ignoring this inherent contradiction. After giving this assertion some thought, I found it absurd. Jefferson was not a charlatan; rather he was a great optimist and a first rate Enlightenment thinker, and, like most mortals, he simply got caught up in the spirit of his times.

As for Plato’s noble lie, I still find his theory interesting, but only because I consider it consistent with my view that human nature is inherently self-interested and because all humans, not just Jefferson, have a tendency to lie to themselves in order to justify what they want. Jefferson’s main political foe, Alexander Hamilton, argues this point well in *Federalist* No. 1: “...we are not always sure that those who advocate the truth are influenced by purer principles than their antagonists. Ambition, avarice, personal animosity, party opposition, and many other motives not more laudable than these, are apt to operate as well as upon those who support as well as those who oppose the right side of a question.”

Each year, when I am teaching the Federalist Era, I quote this passage from the *Federalist Papers* along with the famous dictum by Aristotle: “A virtue is a mean between two extremes.” I then lament that if only Hamilton and Jefferson could have found a way to listen to each other and compromise more, perhaps things might have gone more smoothly during the early formation of our political parties during the 1790s. I then note that I am perhaps being a bit too Jeffersonian, a bit too idealistic.

### *My Late-in-life Conversion*

Though I still find Jefferson’s views toward human nature and economics rather naïve and his status as a slaveholder until his death extremely troubling, I gradually began to see him in a more balanced way. A few years ago, my change in perspective was helped along by colleague,

Steve Lisk, who lectured a class we were co-teaching on the pitfalls of “presentism,” or the error of applying modern standards to events and people of the past. While this theory does not excuse (for me, anyway) the inconsistency between Jefferson’s words and actions when it comes to slavery, it does help me better understand something important: just because Jefferson was so far ahead of his time in so many important ways, it does not necessarily follow that Jefferson was a fully enlightened man in all respects. Thus, his general attitude towards African-Americans and Native Americans falls far short of the standards that we accept today. I partially blame Malone and Peterson, the two great Jefferson biographers during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, for the problems Jefferson’s much tarnished reputation is having today. I think their approach fell just short of hero-worship and put Jefferson on a pedestal that simply could not hold him—or anyone else for that matter.

In 2003, Richard Bernstein did Jefferson’s legacy a big favor by writing an excellent short biography entitled *Thomas Jefferson*. It was the first truly balanced book I ever read on the man. It was also part of the reading for the Jefferson Institute, and Bernstein served as a consulting historian for program. His book was just what I had been looking for—it treats Jefferson with a great deal of respect, but it does so in a thoughtful, balanced way, falling far short of hero worship. What took so long for this balanced perspective, I wondered? Over the course of the Institute, I slowly realized the answer to my question. It’s a simple truth. Long held opinions die hard; my own included.

Over the last few years, I have increasingly forced myself to be more open minded toward the man, myth, and legend. I was further helped along in this regard by Peter Onuf, the Thomas Jefferson Foundation Professor of History at the University of Virginia, who gave several lectures at the Institute. During his first lecture, Onuf emphatically stated a point I had

heard before: the U.S. founding was not inevitable—it only happened because an extraordinary group of men, including Jefferson, banded together and made it happen. I immediately recalled the first time I heard and accepted this thesis, but I had never heard it stated with the force of Onuf's conviction. I now began to see Jefferson and the other founders in a new light. I began to give them a little more breathing room. They were human, too.

While pondering these thoughts, I also reflected upon Jefferson's many heroic actions. He was a man who did not just have faith in America, but he did his best, it seemed, to live out that faith through his many good works in spite of the many obstacles in his way—such as those who favored religious intolerance, and those who refused to pay taxes for the education of “commoners,” and those who wanted to maintain the vestiges of aristocracy.

In December 1862, a month before he implemented the controversial Emancipation Proclamation, Abraham Lincoln stated in his annual message to Congress that he believed America was the earth's “last, best hope.” In uttering those profound words, he was echoing the thoughts of Thomas Jefferson, just like he had done in his immortal Gettysburg Address the month before. And, like Jefferson, Lincoln did his best to back up those words with courageous actions in spite of the enormous obstacles in his way.

I have always respected Abraham Lincoln and found him to be a “good man.” I am now glad to say that I feel the same way about Thomas Jefferson. Peter Gibbon's *A Call to Heroism* offers another provocative quotation—this one from the great educator Horace Mann—that I am sure Jefferson would have liked. In his last public speech, Mann addressed the graduating class of Antioch College and said: “Be ashamed to die before you have won some great victory for humanity.” In spite of some obvious flaws, Jefferson, of course, won many such victories, and it is high time that I finally acknowledge that he is a good man for doing so.