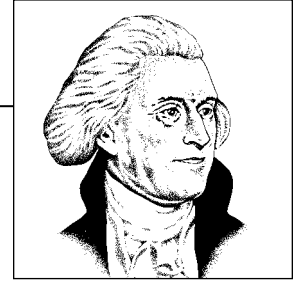


Thomas Jefferson

Extraordinary Statesman



Thomas Jefferson (1743–1826) was the principal author of the Declaration of Independence. In 1801, he became third president of the United States.

At the end of his career, Thomas Jefferson left behind a legacy that few United States presidents have equaled. Jefferson's interests, skills, and accomplishments were immense. He read widely on many subjects—his book collection would become the core of the Library of Congress. He was a respected linguist, naturalist, and architect. He was also the founder of the University of Virginia. Jefferson's most important legacy, however, may be his political philosophy. Few other public figures in American history have so tirelessly championed the causes of political and spiritual freedom.

Childhood and Education Thomas Jefferson was born in Albemarle county, Virginia, on April 13, 1743. He was raised on the family plantation and enjoyed a rather privileged childhood. Thomas's parents saw that he received the best education. He went to private schools as a young man and later attended the elite William and Mary College. In spite of his privileged upbringing, Jefferson had the reputation of being a man of the people.

In 1769, Jefferson was elected to the House of Burgesses—the colonial assembly of Virginia. He served in the assembly until 1774. In the following years, Jefferson became involved in the heated debate over the colonies' allegiance to King George III. As relations with England grew worse, Jefferson took the side of those who sought independence.

In June 1776, the Continental Congress chose Jefferson to draft a declaration of independence. In his powerful prose, Jefferson accused the King of violating the rights of colonists. He declared that all laws should be subject to "the consent of the governed." In words that would be remembered by

future generations, Jefferson established the foundation of American liberty.

A VOICE FROM THE PAST

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.

THOMAS JEFFERSON, The Declaration of Independence

During the Revolution, Jefferson continued to fight for political liberty in his own state of Virginia. After being elected as governor in 1779, he dedicated himself to ending all forms of privilege except those that resulted from talent and virtue.

His progressive thinking also led him to champion religious, as well as political freedom. As governor, he had laws protecting religious freedom written into the state's constitution. Later, Jefferson's belief in the separation of church and state would be included in the first amendment to the United States Constitution.

When the Revolution ended in 1783, Jefferson first served in the Continental Congress before being sent to represent the United States in France. While Jefferson was in France, representatives from the different states gathered in Philadelphia to write a new Constitution. By 1789, the states had ratified the Constitution, and George Washington was chosen as the first president of the United States. Washington appointed Jefferson as his secretary of state.

As secretary of state, Jefferson sought to preserve America as a nation of limited government and independent farmers. He opposed plans for industrialization and a national bank,

which were introduced by the secretary of the treasury, Alexander Hamilton. Jefferson believed that these polices would make the central government too powerful.

In 1793, Jefferson retired from his cabinet position. However, just three years later he became vice-president under John Adams. During the Adams administration, Jefferson continued to defend individual rights. He became especially angered by the passage of the Alien and Sedition Acts. These acts unjustly expelled foreigners and interfered with the freedom of speech. Jefferson's opposition culminated in the Virginia Resolution of 1798. The resolution argued for the right of state legislatures to nullify, or declare invalid, Federal laws that they judged to be tyrannical or unconstitutional.

In the presidential elections of 1800, Jefferson ran against and defeated John Adams. During his first term as president, Jefferson enjoyed a period of relative peace, prosperity, and growth. His enemies labeled him a radical for supporting the French Revolution. But Jefferson was able to defend himself against his opponents by charming them with his wit and good sense. He pointed out the importance of tolerating different political viewpoints.

A VOICE FROM THE PAST

Let us reflect that, having banished from our land that religious intolerance under which mankind so long bled and suffered, we have yet gained little if we countenance [allow] a political intolerance as despotic, as wicked, and capable of as bitter and bloody persecutions.

THOMAS JEFFERSON, First Inaugural Address

Jefferson won widespread support for a second term as president after he successfully negotiated the purchase of the enormous Louisiana Territory from France in 1803. The land purchase doubled the size of the United States and offered new opportunities for westward expansion. By making large areas of farmland available, the purchase also

furthered Jefferson's vision of an agrarian republic.

Jefferson faced greater difficulties during his second term. The most serious problems were caused by the conflict between England and France. The European war had begun to have an impact on American shipping. Jefferson attempted to resolve the problem by passing an embargo. At the end of his term he had to admit that the embargo had failed and agreed to its repeal.

After he left office in 1809, Jefferson returned to Monticello, where he spent the remainder of his 17 years. His last great public service was the founding of the University of Virginia in 1819. Jefferson died seven years later on July 4, 1826—the fiftieth anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. The accomplishments of which Jefferson was most proud are inscribed on his tombstone: “Here was buried Thomas Jefferson, author of the Declaration of American Independence, of the statute of Virginia for religious freedom, and father of the University of Virginia.”

Review Questions

1. How did Thomas Jefferson's book collection become important for the United States?
2. What did Jefferson do to further his vision of the United States as a republic of small independent farmers?
3. Which of Jefferson's accomplishments is not mentioned on his tombstone?

Critical Thinking

4. **Drawing Conclusions** What rights of the American colonists might the King of England have violated?
5. **Making Inferences** What opinion do you think Jefferson had of the rights and privileges of noblemen?
6. **Analyzing Causes** What led Jefferson to oppose Hamilton's plans to promote industry and found a national bank?