

“All Honor to Jefferson (who believed in limited government)”

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It is one of the wonders of the modern political world that John Adams and Thomas Jefferson both died on the 50th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. Unaware that the “Sage of Monticello” had died earlier in the day, the crusty Adams, as he felt his own life slipping away, utter his last words, “Thomas Jefferson still lives.” And so he does ...

Without question, pride of place must go to Jefferson as the author of the Declaration of Independence. That document established Jefferson as one of America’s great political poets, second only to Abraham Lincoln. And fittingly, it was Lincoln himself who recognized the signal importance of its first two paragraphs when he wrote: “All honor to Jefferson — to the man who, in the concrete pressure of a struggle for national independence by a single people, had the coolness, forecast, and capacity to introduce into a merely revolutionary document, an abstract truth, applicable to all men and all times,” where it continues to stand as “a rebuke and a stumbling block to the very harbingers of reappearing tyranny and oppression.”

That abstract truth, of course, was 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.—That to secure these rights Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.”

It is surely a sign of our times that so many Americans no longer know what these words mean, or what their signal importance has been to peoples around the world. The one thing they are certain of, however, is that Jefferson was a hypocrite. How could he assent that all men were created equal and yet own slaves? What these critics fail to notice is that this is precisely what makes Jefferson’s statement so remarkable. Under no necessity for doing so, he penned the immortal words that would ultimately be invoked to put the institution of slavery on the road to extinction. His own draft of the Declaration was even stronger. In it, he made it clear that blacks were human and that slavery was a moral abomination and a blot upon the honor of his country.

Jefferson was serving as Minister in Paris while the Constitution was being drafted, and played no direct part in framing it. But he did make known his objections, the most important being the omission of a Bill of Rights [as also did George Mason]. After the Constitution was ratified, he returned to the United States to serve as

Secretary of State in the Washington administration. In and out of government in the 1790s, he challenged Hamilton's expansive views of federal power, warning against a **mounting federal debt**, a growing patronage machine, and what he considered dangerous monarchical pretensions.

In the tumultuous contest for the presidency in 1800, Jefferson presided over the first peaceful transition of power in modern history, assuring those he had defeated that they too had rights that the majority was bound to respect. His observation, "We are all Republicans, we are all Federalists," established a standard toward which every incoming administration continues to strive.

As president of the United States, Jefferson sought to rally the country around the principles of **limited government**. His First Inaugural Address reminded his fellow citizens that their happiness and prosperity rested upon a "wise and frugal Government, which shall restrain men from injuring one another, shall leave them otherwise free to regulate their own pursuits of industry and improvement, and shall not take from the mouth of labor the bread it has earned." This, he thought, was "the sum of good government" and all that was "necessary to close the circle of our felicities." Although Jefferson had omitted property from the inalienable rights enumerated in the Declaration, he strongly defended private property because it encouraged industry and liberality — and, most importantly, because he thought it just that each individual enjoy the equal right to the fruits of his labor.

From these political principles, Jefferson never wavered. Writing in 1816, he once again insisted that the tasks of a liberal republic were few: government should restrain individuals from encroaching on the equal rights of others, compel them to contribute to the necessities of society, and require them to submit their disputes to an impartial judge. "When the laws have declared and enforced all this, they have fulfilled their functions."

At the same time, Jefferson believed that constitutions must keep pace with the times. If the people wished to alter their frame of government, say, to fund public improvements or education, they were free to do so. But they should do so by constitutional amendment and **not by allowing their representatives to construe the powers of government broadly. He particularly objected to the Court's sitting in judgment on the powers of the legislative and executive branches, and of acting as an umpire between the states and the federal government.** To cede to the judiciary this authority, he believed, would render the Constitution a "ball of wax" in the hands of federal judges. In his battles with Chief Justice John Marshall, he defended the principle of coordinate construction, as Lincoln (and almost every strong president since then) did after him, arguing that each branch of government must determine for itself the constitutionality of its acts.

After his retirement from politics, Jefferson returned to Monticello, where he continued to think about the meaning and requirements of republican government. Republicanism, he was convinced, was more than just a set of institutional

arrangements; at bottom, it depended upon the **character of the people**. To keep alive this civic spirit, he championed public education for both boys and girls, with the most talented boys going on at public expense all the way through college. He envisioned the University of Virginia, to which he devoted the last years of his life, as a temple that would keep alive the “vestal flame” of republicanism and train men for public service. And here, I cannot help but notice how the recent renovations and additions to the Hillsdale campus seem to take their inspiration from Mr. Jefferson’s university, paying graceful homage to an architecture of democracy that inspires and ennobles.

As Jefferson understood it, education had a distinctly political mission, beginning at the elementary level: schools were to form citizens who understood their rights and duties, who knew how earlier free societies had risen to greatness, and by what errors and vices they had declined. Knowing was not enough, however. Jefferson also believed that citizens must have the **opportunity to act**. Anticipating Tocqueville, Jefferson admired the strength of the New England townships and sought to adapt them to Virginia. The wards, as he called them, would allow citizens to have a say on those matters most interesting to them, such as the education of their children and the protection of their property. If ever they became too dispirited to care about these things, republican government could not survive.

The wards were certainly not the greatest of Jefferson’s contributions to the natural rights republic — that honor must be awarded to the Declaration — but they were his most original. Instead of consolidating power or attempting to forge a general will, Jefferson went in the opposite direction, “dividing and sub-dividing” political power, while multiplying the number of interests and views that could be heard. He saw these units of local self-government as a way of bringing the large republic within the reach of citizens and so keeping alive the spirit of republicanism so vital to its preservation. And in this day and age, when **the federal government seems to intrude on every aspect of our daily lives, and people feel powerless over matters of most interest to them, can we doubt that he was right?** For this insight, too, let us echo Lincoln: “All honor to Jefferson”!