The Tragic Trek of Jefferson's Iconic Vision

Equality, Emancipation, Emigration

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ore and more we tend to identify "good ones" and "bad ones," with an ever-widening gap between the two. We prefer the pure and clear divide, letting the subtle recognition of ambiguity slowly fade into the background, if not completely away. However, we humans—the motley lot that we are—contain both saintly and monstrous parts, hero and villain simultaneously. Fortunately, or unfortunately, our system of democracy in America depends on such human beings to make it work.

The legacy of Thomas Jefferson—a man often deified while at other times vilified, yet arguably the greatest proponent of American democracy—contains a tight weave of these conflicting traits and represents a tragic hero in the drama of the American dream of freedom and equality, a drama still on stage and unresolved. His story exemplifies a basic tragic pattern as it expresses "what is contradictory about us, what is constricted about us, what is precarious about us, and what is limited about us."

A 19-foot statue of the six-foot, two-inch man from aristocratic roots in the back woods of Virginia rises in the center of the Jefferson Memorial in Washington, D.C., surrounded on four walls as well as on the dome above by plaques filled with words from his writings.

Commissioned by the Continental Congress in 1776, along with John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Roger Sherman, and Robert Livingston, to produce a unified statement for the thirteen

¹ Simon Critchley, *Tragedy, the Greeks, and Us* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2019), 14.

colonies to justify their vote for independence from the British crown, Jefferson wrote a rough draft and presented it to the other four.

Jefferson originally used stronger language than "self-evident truths," initially proposing "we hold these truths to be sacred and undeniable," but the Congress amended his draft. Jefferson preferred to eliminate slavery in the newly forming country by accusing the king of waging

> cruel war against human nature itself, violating its most sacred rights of life and liberty in the persons of a distant people who never offended him, captivating and carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere or to incur miserable death in their transportation thither.

Heavy influence from southern colonies, particularly South Carolina and Georgia, forced the delegates to delete all references to slavery in the final Declaration. Had these lines survived the debate, the new country would have committed itself to ending the slave trade and abolishing slavery within its borders.

After all the arguments and disagreements, the final document, approved by the Congress on July 4, 1776, still carried Jefferson's iconic vision of equality for all as its driving force:

> We hold these truths to be self-evident; that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights; that among these are life, liberty and pursuit of happiness.²

These words excited and united the colonies in a call to arms to go to war with the British to throw off the oppressive crown. Jefferson's simple phrase has become "the most quoted statement of human rights in recorded history" and "the seminal statement of the American Creed."3

Long the proponents of universal equality among people in their writings, enlightenment philosophers had never moved from

² Thomas Jefferson, "The Declaration of Independence." In A World of Ideas, edited by Lee Jacobus (Boston: Bedford/St Martins, 2017), 119.

³ Joseph J. Ellis, American Sphinx: The Character of Thomas Jefferson. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), 71.

thought into action, from *theoria* to *praxis*. For example, Jean-Jacques Rousseau proposed a "social contract," in which individuals "who may be unequal in strength or intelligence, become every one equal by convention and legal right." But Rousseau states clearly, "If I were a prince or legislator, I should not waste time in saying what wants doing. I should do it, or hold my peace." Jefferson and the new Americans did it. With this revolutionary Declaration, "the United States of America was the first state in world history to base itself on modern equality." Jefferson had also just overturned two thousand years of thought, going back to Aristotle's postulate, "from the hour of their birth, some men are marked out of subjection, others for rule."

With words such as "magical" and "spiritual," Jefferson biographer Joseph Ellis describes the turn that occurred at the moment of signing as "a kind of primal encounter with political purity that all the original participants experienced as a collective epiphany." As noted biographer and historian Jon Meacham added, "With the power of the pen, he [Jefferson] had articulated a new premise for the government of humanity: that all men were created equal." Soon afterward, the states of Vermont and Massachusetts abolished slavery in their constitutions; however, six southern states reframed his phrase to say "all freemen are equal" in their founding documents.

Jefferson gives hope to many, says Meacham, "because we can see in him all the varied and wondrous possibilities of the human experience—the thirst for knowledge, the capacity to create, the love of family and of friends, the hunger for accomplishment, the applause of the world, the marshaling of power, the bending of

⁴ Jean-Jacques Rousseau. "The Origin of Civil Society." In *A World of Ideas*, edited by Lee Jacobus (Boston: Bedford/St Martins, 2017), 102.

⁵ Siep Stuurman, *The Invention of Humanity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), 348.

⁶ Quoted in Henry Wiencek, *Master of the Mountain* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2012), 28.

⁷ Ellis, 215–216.

⁸ Jon Meacham, *Thomas Jefferson: The Art of Power* (New York: Random House, 2012), 143.

⁹ Wiencek, 28.

others to one's own vision." Jefferson's legacy has brought—and continues to bring—hope to many who struggle for equal rights and respect for all people. "The genius of his vision," Ellis contends, "is to propose that our deepest yearnings for personal freedom are in fact attainable."

Many prominent figures throughout history have found affirmation and encouragement in Jefferson's writings. Abraham Lincoln highly respected Jefferson and admired his revolutionary courage:

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, and so to embalm it there, that today, and in all coming days, it shall be a rebuke and a stumbling block to the very harbingers of reappearing tyranny and oppression.¹²

Subsequent presidents, from Woodrow Wilson to Ronald Reagan to Bill Clinton, all "sought the mantle of Jefferson," explains Meacham. Building on Jefferson's foundation, Franklin D. Roosevelt said, "To build a great nation the interests of all groups in every part must be considered, and that only in a large, national unity could real security be found." ¹³

Remembering her childhood acquaintances with Jefferson's vision, former Congresswoman Barbara Jordan opined, "I thought that those words really gave America the kind of promise and opportunity which would free me as an individual to soar as high, as far, as wide as I chose." African-American historian Mary Frances Berry notes the powerful impact Jefferson has had on the

¹² Abraham Lincoln, *The Collected Works of Abraham*, ed. Roy P. Basler (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1953–55), 376. The letter is dated April 6, 1859. Quoted in Meacham, 570.

¹⁰ Meacham, 568.

¹¹ Ellis, 22.

¹³ Meacham, 570.

¹⁴ Martin Doblmeier, director. *Thomas Jefferson: A View from the Mountain.* First Run Features, 2004.

Civil Rights movement. "In speeches by Martin Luther King and in comments that other major civil rights leaders made in their writings, in their sermons, he was always present." Clearly the superstar of American democracy, Jefferson "has become a symbol of all that we value in America."

Contemporary writers and scholars still call upon Jefferson's legacy to give hope and direction in times of national crisis. Referring to the attacks of September 11, 2001, Robert F. Turner of the Virginia School of Law writes:

[P]erhaps more than any other human being in history, Thomas Jefferson is the antithesis to the bigotry and intolerance of Osama bin Laden and his terrorist followers. ... All Americans should cherish the traditions of human freedom Thomas Jefferson and his contemporaries bequeathed to us.¹⁷

However, as with all human heroes, so with Jefferson—his saintly side can veil some unsavory, even monstrous, parts. As historian Clay Jenkinson points out, "When you start to explore the life and achievement of Jefferson, you find that there is a gap between his vision and the beautiful articulation of that vision on the one hand and then his actual achievement as a human being on the other." 18

In his only published book, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Jefferson asks many questions, or "Queries," in a scientific mode of exploration. He remarks on the lack of empirical evidence on the nature of African slaves, then embarks on a study of his own, in which he finds Blacks and Whites are equal in memory but Blacks inferior in reason. "I think one could scarcely be found capable of tracing and comprehending the investigations of Euclid." Also, Blacks are dull, tasteless, and anomalous in imagination. He further observes, "I advance it therefore as a suspicion only, that the blacks, whether originally a distinct race, or made distinct by

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Wiencek, 189.

¹⁸ Clay Jenkinson. "Thomas Jefferson. Parts 1 and 2." video. / Public Broadcasting Service (U.S.). Public Broadcasting Service U.S., 1997.

time and circumstances, are inferior to the whites in the endowments both of body and mind." He perceived Blacks to be more gifted than Whites in music but "never yet could I find a black had uttered a thought above the level of plain narration; never saw even an elementary trait of painting or sculpture." He professes that poetry often grows out of misery. "Among the blacks is misery enough, God knows, but no poetry." 19

Jefferson moves beyond descriptions to conclusions about "what to do with this people," a question perplexing many people in his time who feared the prospect of liberated slaves associating freely in society. He sees the "unfortunate difference in color, and perhaps of faculty" as a "powerful obstacle to the emancipation of these people," referring to his African slaves. "He compares their situation with Roman slaves. "Among the Romans emancipation required but one effort. The slave, when made free, might mix with, without staining the blood of his master. But with us a second is necessary, unknown to history. When freed, he is to be removed beyond the reach of mixture." Clearly for Jefferson, Blacks and Whites cannot mix. He feared that growing up around Blacks would make White children "lazy, haughty, and overbearing" and might take on some of the offensive habits he observed among Black children. "22"

Because of "deep-rooted prejudices entertained by the whites; ten thousand recollections, by the blacks, of the injuries they have sustained; new provocations; the real distinctions which nature has made," the Whites and blacks would form separate and hostile parties, said Jefferson. These sorts of divisions "will probably never end but in the extermination of the one or the other race."

Jefferson continued to speak of freedom for the African Americans and the abolition of slavery, but if and only if those newly freed would live in another, distant place. As early as 1776 and 1777,

²² Peter Kolchin, *American Slavery*, 1619-1877 (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993), 68.

¹⁹ Thomas Jefferson, Notes on the State of Virginia: A Compilation of Data about the State's Natural Resources, Economy and the Nature of the Good Society (1781-1782) (Madison & Adams Press, 2018), 135-138.

²⁰ Ibid., 139.

²¹ Ibid.

²³ Jefferson, *Notes*, 133.

he had begun to suggest the idea of emigration and colonization for freed slaves. He wrote in his *Notes on the State of* Virginia:

To emancipate all slaves...they should continue with their parents to a certain age, then be brought up, at the public expence, to tillage, arts, or sciences, according to their geniusses, till the females should be eighteen, and the males twenty-one years of age, when they should be colonized to such place as the circumstances of the time should render most proper...and to send vessels at the same time to other parts of the world for an equal number of white inhabitants; to induce whom to migrate hither.²⁴

In one sense, he had the well-being of the slaves at heart. The laws of Virginia forbade freed slaves to remain in Virginia, a slave state. At one point, he considered allowing the western territories to house slaves. He thought that by dispersing them across the open land slavery would diffuse. John Adams responded with, ""My God, if a cancer diffuses, it kills." He also explored the idea of exporting freed slaves to the West Indies or possibly to Africa. All along, "Jefferson's opposition to slavery was founded as much on his desire to have an America devoid of black population as on moral or compassionate grounds." ²⁶

Slaveholders agreed with Jefferson, because they feared that the freed slaves could bring an uprising, mounting a formidable force of slaves to join them. The White abolitionists at first saw his plan as a compassionate and altruistic solution but gradually switched positions. Many Black freedmen, including several prominent members of the clergy, publicly opposed this idea as dehumanizing and paternalistic.

By 1819, several prominent White men had formed the American Colonization Society, which tied emancipation to emigration. The elderly Jefferson followed their progress and gave his blessings and endorsement. He foresaw the possibility that the

²⁴ Ibid

²⁵ Ellis, "Thomas Iefferson," Parts 1 and 2.

²⁶ Aaron Schwabach, "Jefferson and Slavery," *Thomas Jefferson Law Review*, 19, no.1 (Spring 1997), 80.

former slaves from America "might carry Christianity and civilization to the uncivilized natives."²⁷

Jefferson never chose to free his own slaves, despite his several attempts at eliminating legalized slavery. Historian Peter Onuf points out that Jefferson needed the labor of his slaves' labor because his estate had fallen deeply in debt, owing more than \$100,000 at the time of his death, quite a large sum of money at that time. Also, Jefferson could not imagine the possibility of an interracial republic, the coexistence of freed former slaves intermingling with their former masters. Because he regarded Black people as inferior, Jefferson suspected that they could not become adequate citizens in the democracy. He also feared a violent rebellion by freed slaves, precipitating the next great war, and preferred to keep African-Americans, once released, at a far and controllable distance.²⁸ He wrote in a letter to his friend Edward Coles, who moved to Illinois with his slaves so that they could all be free, "amalgamation with the other color produces degradation to which no lover of his country, no lover of excellence in the human character, can innocently consent."29

Jefferson possessively hung on to his slaves and considered them dependent on him to provide and care for them. When asked in 1789 what he thought about a Quaker experiment in which slave holders freed then rehired their slaves, Jefferson replied, "to give liberty to, or rather, to abandon persons whose habits have been formed in slavery is like abandoning children."³⁰

After his wife Martha died and Jefferson journeyed to Paris, he developed a special fondness for a young mulatto slave named Sally Hemings, a companion and servant to his younger daughter, Maria (often called Polly) and thirty years his junior. The Hemings family represents an odd arrangement somewhat common among

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²⁷ John Harvey Furbey, "Liberia Fails as Negro Haven," *The Living Age* (1897–1941), 358 (July, 1940), 4486; American Periodicals, 459.

²⁸ Peter Onuf, Thomas Jefferson and Slavery. INTELECOM, 2011.

²⁹ Ibram X. Kendri. Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America (New York: Nation Books, 2016), 118.

³⁰ In a letter to Edward Bancroft, January 26, 1789, *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*. Julian P. Boyd, ed, XIV, 492–493. Quoted in Fawn Brodie, *Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History* (New York: Norton, 1974), 235.

slave holding families. Jefferson had received the Hemings family as slaves through an inheritance from his father-in-law, John Wayles, who sired Sally and probably the other Hemings children. Therefore, Sally Hemings was both Jefferson's property and his wife Martha's half-sister, thus blurring the lines between family and property, between the free and the owned.

Much controversy surrounds Jefferson's thirty-eight year relationship with this young slave. ³¹ He often spoke strongly against miscegenation, sexual relationships between races, and interracial marriage, as noted above. Yet while in Paris he developed an entangling intimate relationship with Sally, a connection which he was loathe to abandon when she threatened to apply for her freedom while in France, where she was considered a free person. He insisted that she return to Virginia with him, where she knew he could not grant her freedom without sending her out of the state. In the end she returned to Virginia with him where they continued their close relationship, and Jefferson agreed to free all of her children when they reached their twenty-first birthday. By all accounts, he kept this promise, with her children being the only slaves he ever manumitted during his lifetime.

Jefferson found himself caught in a heart-breaking dilemma. He could not marry Sally, because Virginia law forbade mixed marriages. He could not recognize her children as his own or grant them as good an education as he had received. Even when freeing her children—and his as well—he risked the display of favoritism among the other slaves, plus he had to obtain special permission from the state to allow them not to be deported.

A 1998 DNA study verified definitively that Thomas Jefferson had fathered at least one of Sally Hemings' children.³² Jefferson

³¹ Jennifer Jensen Wallach. "The Vindication of Fawn Brodie," *The Massachusetts Review*, 43, no. 2 (July 2002), 277–295.

³² "The results clearly show that the male-line descendants of Field Jefferson and Eston Hemings have identical Y-chromosome haplotypes (the particular combination of variants at defined loci on the chromosome). Scientists note that there is less than a 1 percent probability that this is due to chance." "Statement on the TJMF Research Committee Report on Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings." Daniel P. Jordan, Ph.D., President Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation, Inc. January 26, 2000, 2.

descendants and traditionalists scoffed at the report, as had family members and supporters from the first day the lurid story broke in a Richmond newspaper back in 1802, causing a scandal in the Iefferson presidency.³³

Following the release of the DNA report, Ellen Goodman raised some stinging yet very poignant questions, focusing on the personal more than the political relationships involved. "What is the possibility of...a love affair between property and property owner? There is no evidence that Jefferson Hemings...transcended master and slave to loving companions." Goodman focuses here on the key point, often overlooked: "He owned her."34

About 1815, with his financial resources deteriorating, Jefferson came to realize that he depended on his slaves to maintain his comfortable standard of living. He also added other expenses in addition to the basic operation of Monticello. He had expanded his President's House there to accommodate lavish dinners to host visiting dignitaries and luminaries.³⁵ He also redesigned the landscape to disguise any signs of slave labor by having visitors take an alternate approach route to the house.³⁶ These changes consumed much of his reserves, and the plantation produced much less than expected. The elder Jefferson, "having looked in the face of that dilemma, chose to buy more Bordeaux wine and more books and more scientific instruments and to live in his comfortable way and not to emancipate."37

In his way, Jefferson carried his powerful vision of the equality of all throughout his life.³⁸ He advocated the abolition of slavery every step of his way, even to his last letter. Unable to attend the celebration of the 50th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration in Washington in 1826 because of his ill health,

³³ Brodie, 348 ff.

³⁴ Ellen Goodman. "The Real Jefferson-Hemings Issue: He Owned Her," Hartford Courant (Hartford, Connecticut), 6 Nov 1998, 17.

³⁵ John B. Boles. Jefferson: Architect of American Liberty (New York: Basic Books, 2017), 563.

³⁶ Wiencek, 268.

³⁷ Jenkinson.

³⁸ Of course, in other ways his continued treatment of his own slaves as property, rather than as equal individuals, would suggest otherwise.

Jefferson wrote his apologies in a letter to Roger Weightman on July 24, just ten days before his own death. He regretted that he could not join the small remnant of signers who would attend and enjoy with them "the consolatory fact that our fellow citizens, after half a century of experience and prosperity, continue to approve the choice we made." He went on to state his lifelong principle of equality of all people.

The general spread of the light of science has already laid open to view the palpable truth, that the mass of mankind has not been born with saddles on their backs, nor a favored few booted and spurred, ready to ride them legitimately, by the grace of God.³⁹

As he carried this commitment to equality, he held great positions of power, including governor of Virginia and Secretary of State, Vice-President, and two-term President of the United States, yet he never completed the work of emancipation, even for his own slaves. As he chose a "soft life" at Monticello, he often employed "soft answers" 40 to smooth his political and financial interests; "the evidence of his life contradicts the logical imperatives of his thought." John Chester Miller explains that Jefferson "was too much the political pragmatist, too intent upon achieving lofty but realizable goals, and too much the product of his background as a Virginia slaveowner to grapple with this particular example of tyranny over another race with the same fervor he had displayed in contending against British tyranny."41 He "believed wholeheartedly that only the electoral vote, not the moral dictate of elites, could affect lasting societal change, and he had hoped...that the generation after his-reared in an atmosphere of political liberty—would expand the concept of liberty to include general emancipation."42

One of the plaques in the Jefferson Memorial includes these words from his *Autobiography*, displaying his deep concern for freedom: "Nothing is more certainly written in the book of fate than

³⁹ Brodie, 468.

⁴⁰ Wiencek, 268.

⁴¹ John Chester Miller. *Master of the Mountain* (New York: The Free Press, 1977), 279.

⁴² Boles, 562.



that these people are to be free." This quote stops mid-sentence. Not included on the plaque, the rest of the original passage reads: "Nor is it less certain that the two races, equally free, cannot live in the same Nature, government. habit, opinion has drawn indelible lines of distinction between them."43 Jefferson's writings contain strong passages on both inferiority of African-Americans to whites and their "blend inability to in the mixture" of civilized society with people.

Therefore, in Jefferson we see a true paradox, a weave of both good and bad together. This hero of American democracy carries a villainous side, as well. He rejected any possible "mixture" of Blacks and Whites in society, preferring emigration and colonization if Africans were ever to attain free status in America. As his writings began to be circulated more widely, he "emerged as the preeminent American authority on Black intellectual inferiority." He decried the prospect of interracial sexuality and marriage, yet engaged for his last thirty-seven years in such a relationship with a mulatto slave as concubine. He never freed any of his own slaves, except for a handful who happened to be his own progeny.

Tragic consequences can arise when we fail to see the interconnectedness of these traits. Some have taken his reputation as iconic American visionary as license to accept all he said and did, including the negative and pernicious aspects. On the other hand, other have taken his monstrous traits as cause to denigrate and disregard the true positive and lasting value of his vision carried through time. Some claim him as ally for their own white supremacist views. Others vilify him as an aloof and evil misogynist.

⁴³ Thomas Jefferson, *The Autobiography of Thomas Jefferson* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications), 45.

⁴⁴ Kendri, 109.

A horrifying example of these misconceptions occurred in August of 2017. Charlottesville, Virginia, provided an ideal venue for a white supremacist mass gathering, known as "Unite the Right." As Sarah Ellison would note after the event, "[f]ew places could beat Charlottesville in its symbolic appeal for white supremacists looking to make a point."45 A group marched toward a statue of Robert E. Lee carrying tiki torches, eventually surrounding a group of counterprotestors at the Jefferson statue at the University of Virginia. Later during the rally, one of the supporters of Unite Right crashed his car into the opposing crowd, killing an innocent woman. About a month later, another group of the counter-demonstrators, carrying signs saying "racist" and "rapist," shrouded the Jefferson statue in a counter-rally. Teresa Sullivan, president of the university, denounced the action as "desecrating" ground that "many of us consider sacred."46 These opposed groups saw Jefferson on one side as supportive of White supremacist ideas and on the other as a perverse user of women and Blacks as property.

Jefferson biographer John Boles sums up the nature of the paradox that is Jefferson's legacy.

Once lauded as the champion of the little man, today he is vilified as a hypocritical slave owner, professing a love of liberty while quietly driving his own slaves to labor harder in his pursuit of personal luxury. Surely an interpretative middle ground is possible, if not necessary. If we hope to understand the enigma that is Thomas Jefferson, we must view him holistically and within the rich context of his time and place.⁴⁷

As James Parton said in 1874, "If Jefferson was wrong, America is wrong. If America is right, Jefferson was right." We

⁴⁵ Sarah Ellison, "Why Charlottesville, Liberal College Town, Became Ground-Zero for White Supremacy," *Vanity Fair*. Online edition August 15, 2017

⁴⁶ UVA President Criticizes Jefferson Statue Shrouding - Associated Press. September 13,2017. Information from *The Daily Progress*, www.dailyprogress.com.

⁴⁷ Boles, 13.

⁴⁸ James Parton, James, *Life of Thomas Jefferson: Third President of the United States* (Boston: J.R. Osgood and Company), 1874.

Americans remain both indebted to him as well as forever linked in his struggle. "The American dream, then, is just that, the Jeffersonian dream writ large." Likewise, America's tragedy is the Jeffersonian tragedy, writ large.

Jefferson, and the legacy that moves forward with him, embodies some of the very nature of tragedy: "the dissolution of all the markers of certitude that finds expression in the repeated question 'What shall I do?'"⁵⁰ Like Sophocles' character Electra, we stand with Jefferson paralyzed on the threshold of the exciting possibilities and opportunities of furthering the vision on the one hand, and the comfortable retreat into the preservation of status quo and existing privilege on the other.

Should Jefferson's shortcomings nullify his enduring legacy, tragic as it may be? Although he never fulfilled his iconic vision that "all men are created equal," he nevertheless created "an imperfect but lasting democratic mind and heart." Such is the nature of tragedy—the saint and the monster, hero and villain, inextricably linked together. The one who envisioned the self-evident equality of all now stands center stage, on the threshold of life and destruction.

We do not need another Jefferson. His beautiful and amazing dream of equality travels with us still. Today we need a different kind of visionary, one to carry that initial, foundational core of American values the next step, and move the country beyond the limits and constraints that shackled Jefferson and still bind us. We must find a path beyond the tragic "What shall I do now?"

⁴⁹ Ellis, 77.

⁵⁰ Critchley, 43.

⁵¹ Meacham, 565.