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"JEFFERSON STILL SURVIVES"

I.

The Fourth of July is a special day in American history marking the birthday of the Declaration of Independence and of the United States as well. The day is usually celebrated by patriotic speeches, marching bands, picnics and fireworks. Lost in the revelry is another less joyous milestone. On July 4, 1826, 50 years after the issuance of the Declaration of Independence the second and third presidents of the United States, John Adams and Thomas Jefferson passed away. While Adams and Jefferson were bitter political enemies, Adams' dying words; "Jefferson still survives" paid homage to the accomplishment of his foe and laid the foundation of an enduring Jefferson myth.

In an era when heroes seem to fall by the wayside everyday as an ungrateful posterity rocks one too many pedestal, Jefferson seems to have stayed above the fray of deheroization. While the wind of historical revisionism has not spared the Jefferson image, the author of the Declaration of Independence remained a revered character of American and world history.

II.

Thomas Jefferson was born on April 13, 1743 in Shadwell, Virginia. His father Peter was a wealthy surveyor and member of the Virginia House of Burgesses, and his mother Jane Randolph was a noble woman. The young Thomas learned several things from his father including responsibility, diligence and a respect for books and learning.

Jefferson began to study the classics at age nine and by age seventeen he became an expert in ancient Greeco-Roman thought. At age eighteen he enrolled in the University of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia. Having met his mentor, the only non-denominational teacher at the college, Dr. William Small of Scotland, he wrote: "I got my first views of the expansion of science and the system of things in which we are placed and it was this influence that probably fixed the destiny of my life".¹

Upon graduation in 1762 he began to read law and in 1764 he inherited an estate of 2,750 acres from his father. In 1767 Jefferson was admitted to the Virginia Bar and in 1769 he became a member of the Virginia House of Burgesses. In 1772 he married a 23 year old widow, named Martha Wayles Skelton.

By the time Jefferson reached adulthood in 1764 he had encountered several life forming experiences. His father taught him the value of education, self-reliance and political participation, his teachers introduced him to the Enlightenment, his classical studies presented him with the model of the ideal statesman: the philosopher king, and the estate got him acquainted with the institution of slavery.

In 1774 Thomas Jefferson participated in his state's first revolutionary convention and his instructions for Virginia's delegates to the First Continental Congress were published under the title "A Summary View of the Rights of British America". In this pamphlet he asserted the colonists' natural rights to self-government but stopped short of declaring independence.²

¹ Merrill D. Peterson, "Thomas Jefferson: A Brief Life," in *Thomas Jefferson. The Man. His World. His Influence.* ed. Lally Weymouth (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1973), p. 14.

² Thomas Jefferson, *Writings* (The Library of America, 1984), p. 1520.

In June 1776 Jefferson was appointed to head a committee charged with the writing of the Declaration of Independence. He was finished with the draft on July 2 and after a two and a half day debate the Declaration of Independence was adopted by the Continental Congress.

The Declaration was technically a painstakingly written lawyer's brief indicting the king of Britain on various violations of the social contract and justifying America's desire for independence.

In the next 3 years Jefferson served in the Virginia House of Delegates and on July 1, 1779 he was elected governor of his state. While his gubernatorial administration was marked with frustration and a general inability to lead the state during wartime, his attempts to rewrite Virginia's legal code introduced changes in the school system and promoted freedom of religion. Although in 1781 his term expired and he returned to his Monticello estate, grief over his wife's death forced him back to the political arena a year later.

From 1785 Jefferson served as a Minister to France. His stay in Paris reenforced his acceptance of the Enlightenment and exposed him to the ideas of the French Revolution. As Jefferson became Secretary of State of the Washington government in 1790 the Virginia planter holding agrarian beliefs got into several conflicts with the more urbane Secretary of the Treasury, Alexander Hamilton. Jefferson and his followers, the Republicans opposed the growing power of the central government, emphasized the importance of agriculture and supported France in the post 1789 European conflict. In 1796 he was elected vice president of the incoming administration of John Adams and in the following year he was chosen president of the American Philosophical Society.

As the relationship between France and the United States exacerbated due to the pro-British policies of the Adams government, Jefferson became politically isolated and he was portrayed by the popular press as a supporter of French Jacobines. When the Federalist Adams administration introduced the Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798 aimed at crippling Republican opposition, Jefferson returned to Monticello to work on his reply, known as the Kentucky Resolutions. The resolutions promoted the so-called state compact theory arguing that the United States Constitution had

resulted from a compact between the states and the federal government, giving states a right to nullify laws deemed hostile to their interests.

In 1800 Thomas Jefferson rode the crest of a society wide dissatisfaction with the Federalist Adams administration to the White House. In his inauguration speech he counseled unity and forgiveness as he declared: "We have called by different names brethren of the same principle. We are all Republicans, we are all Federalists. If there be any among us who would wish to dissolve this Union or to change its Republican form, let them stand undisturbed as monuments of the safety with which error of opinion may be tolerated where reason is left free to combat it".³

Jefferson was the first President to be inaugurated in Federal City, the future seat of U.S. government. In contrast to the lavish life-style of the previous administration Jefferson embraced simplicity and prudence. He intended to run the nation as a prudent farmer forcing government to live within its means. He cut down the size of the military and began to sell lands between the Mississippi and Ohio rivers to finance government activities.

His greatest presidential achievement was the acquisition of the Mississippi Valley. The contract executed between Jefferson and Napoleon went into history as the Louisiana Purchase of 1803 and for a mere 15 million dollars doubled the size of the United States.

In light of the Louisiana Purchase Jefferson's reelection in 1804 was hardly a surprise. Whereas the Jefferson administration achieved its greatest triumph in the foreign policy arena, the President's mishandling of international relations proved to be his downfall as well.

In 1803 Europe was set ablaze by the Napoleonic Wars and Jefferson wanted to keep the United States out of overseas hostilities. America as a trading partner to the main belligerents: France and Britain, was in a precarious situation. In 1805 Napoleon following up on his historic victory at Austerlitz assumed control of most of continental Europe and in 1806 Admiral Nelson's triumph at Trafalgar resulted in a British naval blockade around Europe. American merchant ships were caught in the middle where

³ *Ibid.*, p. 493.

complying with British trade regulations could have meant seizure of goods by French authorities.

British frigates repeatedly harassed American vessels and through a practice called impressment they raided United States merchant ships and kidnapped sailors deemed subjects of the Queen. In 1807 seething British-American hostilities reached the boiling point in the Chesapeake Affair. A British warship, "Leopard" had attacked the United States vessel "Chesapeake" killing three sailors and kidnapping four. Following a nation wide uproar Congress on Jefferson's prodding passed the Embargo Act effectively stopping all foreign trade.

Jefferson's efforts to protect the United States from "entangling alliances" with economic measures were frustrated by his own countrymen as the historically commercial and shipping towns of New England turned to smuggling to recover lost profits. The Act had also thrown American agriculture in a crisis exposing Jefferson to broad-based public criticism. After the election of 1808 a tired and disillusioned Jefferson returned to his beloved Monticello estate in Virginia.

Freed from the pressure of governing Jefferson turned his attention to one of his favorite causes, education. In 1814 in a letter to Peter Carr he outlined his comprehensive education reform plan and later donated his library to become the foundation of the Library of Congress. In 1817, the cornerstone of the University of Virginia—his long cherished dream—was laid and the University opened for instruction in 1825. In the last year of his life the two time president of the United States and the author of the Declaration of Independence was forced to live in financial uncertainty. While the Virginia legislature authorized a lottery at Monticello, friends and supporters raised funds to help Jefferson to keep his estate.

Any attempt to summarize the achievement of Thomas Jefferson is doomed by the greatness and complexity of his lifework. A frustrated writer, however, might find solace in the words of the man himself, as Jefferson's epitaph describes the three deeds he was the most proud of. "Here was buried Thomas Jefferson, Author of the Declaration of American Inde-

pendence, of the Statute of Virginia for Religious Freedom and Father of the University of Virginia".⁴

Unarguably the Declaration of Independence is Thomas Jefferson's most significant achievement. While on the surface the Declaration appears to be a lawyerly brief explaining the causes of America's separation from Britain, the text assured a place for its author among the immortals of human history. Whereas the Declaration is addressed to the British King, it has a greater audience as well, humanity. The famous opening line: "When in the course of human events ..." removes the conflict from a British—American context and emphasizes its cosmopolitan significance.⁵ The need for independence arises from natural law as freedom and equality are natural rights guaranteed by God.

The well-known next paragraph is the expression of the American Ideal. In Jefferson's and consequently all Americans' view humans are equal and possess inalienable natural rights; the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Should a government entrusted by the people to protect these rights refuse to carry out this responsibility, it can be removed from power.

According to Norton the Declaration is the pinnacle of Anglo-Saxon and American political thinking. Jefferson's ideas are based on the Mayflower Compact, Hobbes' "Leviathan" and Locke's "Two Treatises of Government".

When Jefferson declares "these self evident truths" he speaks to everyone as life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness are universal principles, the holy trinity of liberal capitalism. Much has been written about the phrase "the pursuit of happiness" and Commager offers a succinct explanation: "Happiness meant milk for the children, and meat on the table, a well-built house, and a well-filled barn, freedom from tyranny of the State,

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 706.

⁵ Henry Steele Commager, "The Declaration of Independence," in *Thomas Jefferson. The Man. His World. His Influence.* ed. Lally Weymouth (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1973), p. 182.

the superstition of the Church, the authority of the military and the malaise of ignorance".⁶

The lofty egalitarianism of the Declaration notwithstanding, Jefferson is often criticized as an elitist since the text does not make mention of women and slaves. The famous clause "all men are created equal" is frequently held up as a mirror to force American society to face its paradox nature.

The greatest asset of the Declaration of Independence is not its presentment of hitherto unheard of revolutionary ideas, but its eloquent yet succinct elevation of the achievements of Western thought to universal level. The famous statement: "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with inherent and inalienable rights: that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" reverberated through not only American but world history as well.

Eighty-seven years later Abraham Lincoln equated the Civil War with the defense of the ideas of the Declaration and in 1963 Martin Luther King in his celebrated "I have a dream" speech at the Washington Memorial rebuked America for her digression from the Jeffersonian ideal. Jefferson's ideas inspired revolutionaries in Paris in 1789, in Budapest in 1848 and even in Saigon in 1945.

While the Declaration is a call to arms of individual political freedom, the Statute of Virginia for Religious Freedom defends the independence of the human mind. The statute was written in 1781 at a time when the clergy dominated all aspects of public life in the Old World and five of the thirteen American states displayed elements of an established church.⁷

Whereas Rousseau, Mably and Sebastien Mercier attacked the abuses of the church, these philosophes accepted the notion of an establishment or a state supported church. Jefferson rejected the idea of an

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 186.

⁷ Henry Steele Commager, "Jefferson and the Enlightenment," in *Thomas Jefferson. The Man. His World. His Influence* ed. Lally Weymouth (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1973), p. 56.

established church as he examined Virginia's jurisdiction over spiritual matters.⁸

While laws abridging religious freedom had been eliminated, the state's assembly could still punish individuals deemed to be heretics for denying the existence of God or of the Holy Trinity. Jefferson having branded this practice "religious slavery"⁹ argued that government could only control those areas of individual life that had been surrendered to it.

Human conscience, or the spiritual sphere could have but one ruler, God itself. Jefferson eloquently limited the authority of government to the protection of one's "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" asserting that diverse religious views did not threaten one's natural rights. "The legitimate powers of government extend to such acts only as are injurious to others. But it does me no injury for my neighbor to say there are twenty gods or no god. It neither picks my pocket, nor breaks my leg."¹⁰ Although the General Assembly enacted the statute in 1786, freedom of religion was not federally recognized in the United States until the ratification of the Bill of Rights in 1791.

Thomas Jefferson's last gift to posterity was the University of Virginia. Believing that the best guarantee of democracy was an educated citizenry Jefferson strove to establish a school dedicated to the inculcation of the values of the Enlightenment. In 1779 he put forth a threepartite plan to promote public education calling for the establishment of public elementary schools, reforming the College of William and Mary and the creation of a state library. The Northwest Ordinance co-sponsored by him divided the territories between the Mississippi and Ohio rivers to townships with 36 sections and the income derived from one section was set aside for public schools.

In an 1810 letter to Governor John Tyler, Jefferson described public schools and public education as the foundations of democracy. Having retired from the Presidency Jefferson decided to devote all his efforts to the

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

⁹ Thomas Jefferson, *Writings*. (The Library of America, 1984), p. 285.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 285.

creation of a university, a "future bulwark of the human mind in the Western Hemisphere".¹¹

Jefferson was involved in all phases of the building process including planning, fund-raising, organizing and as Whitehill asserted: the University of Virginia represented the pinnacle of his career as an architect.¹² He was the school's first rector as well enabling him to control all aspects of academic life at Charlottesville.

The university was part of a two stage educational system where primary schools taught reading, writing, arithmetic, geography and history to provide a foundation for entry to higher education. The University offered instruction in ten fields: Ancient and Modern Languages, Mathematics, Physico-Mathematics, Natural Philosophy, Botany, Medicine, Government, Law and Ideology.

Jefferson viewed education as a means of self-improvement not only for the individual but society as well as he wrote: "Nothing more than education advances the power, the prosperity and the happiness of a nation."¹³

Whereas the Declaration of Independence, the Statute for Virginia of Religious Freedom and the University of Virginia are arguably among the greatest achievements of humanity, a complete picture of the man must include his inconsistencies as well.

Historians found Jefferson's achilles heel in his ownership of slaves. Douglas L. Wilson tackles the paradox of Jefferson the author of the Declaration of Independence and a slave holder arguing that such criticism is a result of a faulty view of history called presentism, or judging the past through the standards of the present.¹⁴

It is beyond doubt that some of Jefferson's writings might appear racist to today's observer. In his "Notes on Virginia" Jefferson argued that

¹¹ Walter Muir Whitehill, "Thomas Jefferson. Architect," in *Thomas Jefferson. The Man. His World. His Influence* ed. Lally Weymouth (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1973), p. 176.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 177.

¹³ Thomas Jefferson, *Writings* (The Library of America, 1984), p. 462.

¹⁴ Douglas L. Wilson, "Thomas Jefferson and the Character Issue," in *Jefferson Anniversary Series* (United States Information Service, 1993)

racial integration was not desirable preferring gradual emancipation and resettlement instead. In his musings on possible locations for the University of Virginia he emphasized the proximity of white areas as a selection guideline.

There are three arguments in Jefferson's defense. He admitted that his conclusions had resulted strictly from personal observations of his own slaves. He was aware that his knowledge was insufficient in this respect, and the first version of the Declaration of Independence contained a passage on slavery condemning the King for this heinous practice, but fears of Southern opposition forced its omission.¹⁵

Jefferson was also a staunch advocate of agriculture rejecting the values of urban America. In an age of ardent economic expansionism he argued the supremacy of agriculture: "Farmers whose interests are entirely agricultural are the true representatives of the Great American interest, and are alone to be relied on for expressing the proper American sentiments."¹⁶

Jefferson also fervently believed in small government, a limited administrative bureaucracy, and for a proponent of a government "strong enough to protect natural rights but not strong enough to take them away", the power of the Supreme Court to review the constitutionality of the actions of the President and Congress created a dangerous precedent.

Jefferson's response to the Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798, known as the Kentucky Resolutions forwarded the compact theory of government. In his reply to the Adams administration's anti-Republican and anti-French measures he asserted that the United States Constitution was a result of a compact or agreement between the federal government and the states, therefore individual states had a right to nullify or interpose laws found hostile to their interests. While no state took that course and Jefferson warned against violence, he unwittingly laid the foundations of the states' rights movement, the cornerstone of Southern ideology leading to the Civil War.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Richard Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), p. 36.

The second term of Jefferson's presidency also contained a disappointment as his inability to deal with the European crisis led to the divisive Embargo Act and brought the nation closer to America's second war with Britain, the War of 1812.

Leonard Levy found several inconsistencies in the Jefferson image establishing a sharp contrast between the champion of freedom of the "Notes" and the advocate of tyranny in his response to the acquittal of Aaron Burr.

Aaron Burr a former vice president of Jefferson was caught up in a bizarre scheme to establish a separate republic in the Louisiana territory. Although he was tried for treason, a lack of two constitutionally warranted witnesses led to his acquittal. Jefferson, frustrated by the legal wrangling wrote: "There are extreme cases when the laws become inadequate even to their own preservation and where the universal resource is a dictator or martial law".¹⁷

Also the author of the Kentucky Resolutions protesting governmental restrictions on freedom of speech and press signed a bill in 1806 making the utterance of "contemptuous and disrespectful words" against Congress and the President a crime.¹⁸

III.

The Jeffersonian legacy is as complex as the man himself. He was a Renaissance man, a rare specimen in today's specialization who in James Parton's words could calculate an eclipse, survey an estate, tie an artery, plan an edifice, try a cause, break a horse, dance a minuet and play the violin.¹⁹

¹⁷ Leonard Levy, "Jefferson as a Civil Libertarian," in *Thomas Jefferson. The Man. His World. His Influence* ed. Lally Weymouth (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1973), p. 193.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 194.

¹⁹ Douglas L. Wilson, "Thomas Jefferson and the Character Issue," in *Jefferson Anniversary Series* (United States Information Service, 1993)

In addition to the historic significance of his vast lifework Jefferson was an ardent advocate of healthy living, daily exercise and a fat free diet.²⁰

According to one of the foremost experts of the field Merrill D. Peterson, the Jefferson image consists of three elements. He exists as a political symbol: the Father of the Declaration of Independence and the champion of liberty; a cultural hero: the creator of the University of Virginia, and a world citizen whose political views are guiding posts for anyone embarking on the treacherous road toward democracy.²¹

John Catanzariti anoints him with the title of American Leonardo²² and George F. Will celebrates in his person the victory of homo faber over homo politicus.²³

Jefferson is applicable to all aspects of human existence as he speaks to all levels of man. The Declaration addresses the political being, his views on religion underline the independence of the human mind and the University of Virginia represents man's neverending struggle for self-improvement. His inventions: the moldboard plow, and the swivel chair are living monuments of human curiosity. His values: frugality, personal independence, appreciation of work and education can show the way to anyone lost in the complexities of the waning years of the twentieth century. Jefferson, however, was not beyond human frailty and he was susceptible to inconsistencies as in Levy's words his pen often proved mightier than his practice. The complexity of his character invited controversy for he was a slave owner and a revolutionary, a cosmopolitan and a patriot,²⁴ a champion of political equality stopping short of universal manhood suffrage.²⁵ None of these inconsistencies can diminish the fact that on the 250th anniversary of

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Merrill D. Peterson, "The Image of Jefferson," in *Jefferson Anniversary Series* (United States Information Service, 1993)

²² John Catanzariti, "An American Leonardo," (Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society)

²³ George F. Will, "Mr. Jefferson Comes to Town," *Public Interest* (Summer 1993): p. 50.

²⁴ Richard Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), p. 32.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

his birth the world celebrates a person who achieved two of the greatest standards a human being can ever dream of: the universal self-actualized man and the philosopher king.