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Thomas Jefferson as American Hero

When Gutzon Borglum began work on Mount Rushmore he sought to immortalize four of America's greatest men. George Washington, who led the infant nation through the battles of the revolution, was the father of his country. Abraham Lincoln, who guided the ship of state through its greatest challenge, as brother fought brother threatening to rip apart the union, was its greatest President. Theodore Roosevelt, who used his position as President to project American power around the globe, embodied the boundless energy and spirit of twentieth century America. Thomas Jefferson, who authored the Declaration of Independence and those famous words about "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness", was America's voice. Each of these men was an American hero when Borglum began to chip away at that cold block of granite in South Dakota. But over the years since President Franklin Roosevelt remarked on the grandeur of the monument, Thomas Jefferson has taken a beating from historians. In the eyes of many historians the author of our American creed has turned into a slaveholder who expounded on the inferiority of African-Americans, and even worse, a miscegenist who held his own mulatto children in bondage at his estate in Virginia. How did Jefferson's image change so drastically? How is one to reconcile this new picture of Jefferson with the one that every American school child received of the gentleman scholar of Monticello? More importantly, can a man who espoused beliefs repugnant to most present day Americans continue to be an American hero?

In order to explore these questions, we must first recount how Jefferson became an American hero. Born into an aristocratic planter family in 18th century Virginia, Jefferson received the best education a young gentleman could expect in the south. He attended the College of William and Mary before studying law with George Wythe, a preeminent attorney who would groom him not only in the ways of the law, but in classical education and politics as well. From here Jefferson took his place in the Virginia House of Burgesses, fighting to restructure Virginia's law code and protect religious freedom in the colony. He married a wealthy widow, Martha Wayles Skelton, cementing his place in the Virginia aristocracy – and drastically increasing both his land and slave holdings. Jefferson made his meteoric rise in history as author of the Declaration of Independence at the Second Continental Congress, a task looked upon with somewhat less fanfare in 1776. He would go on to serve as Virginia's Governor, Minister to France, America's first Secretary of State, and the second Vice-President. In 1800 Jefferson's Republicans would sweep into office under his leadership, with Jefferson serving two terms as President. During his terms of office Jefferson doubled the size of the union with the Louisiana Purchase and opened up the west for settlement through the daring explorations of Lewis and Clark.¹

Jefferson was a successful president, with an outstanding record in his first term. However, it is his authorship of the Declaration of Independence that won him the favor of the American people. Jefferson's elegant words were not looked on as great at the time. Their genius seemed to lay more in their ringing indictment of King George III than in their eloquence in expressing the foundations for a new nation. However, later generations would adopt the

¹ Bernstein, Richard B. *Thomas Jefferson* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003) 232-233.

preamble to this document as a sort of “American creed.”² “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.” American school children would recite it in class. Politicians would quote it in their speeches. Small town newspaper editorialists would cite it in their articles arguing against an increase in sanitation fees. This phrase summed up the American identity. From our vantage point in twenty-first century America we can look back on this document as not only the preeminent piece of legislation breaking ties with England, but as the founding document of our new nation. Biographer James Parton said, “If Jefferson is wrong, America is wrong. If America is right, Jefferson is right.”³ Thomas Jefferson and the American experience are intertwined, almost synonymous. One cannot be an American without adopting Jefferson’s words as your core democratic belief.

The idea of Thomas Jefferson as the author of our American creed may be what qualifies him as a hero, but it is also what leads some to question his worthiness for that title. If belief in Jefferson’s self-evident truths is a crucial part of the American identity, then the idea of that founding father holding beliefs antithetical to most Americans leads some to abandon him as the ultimate American idol. It is here that Jefferson’s dealings with slavery arise. As an aristocratic Virginia planter it is no surprise that slavery was central to Jefferson’s life. It is in fact claimed that the first recollection Thomas Jefferson had of his childhood was being cared for by a slave as his family moved from one plantation to another.⁴ It is widely known that throughout his life Jefferson depended on slaves in his role as master of Monticello. This is enough to give pause to

² Burns, Ken. *Interview Transcripts: Joe Ellis, Historian*. Public Broadcasting System. July 25, 2006. <http://www.pbs.org/jefferson/archives/interviews/frame.htm>

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid, 1.

some historians. After all, modern America despises the scourge of slavery and recognizes the indelible stain left on the American ethos as a result of the hundreds of years of brutal slavery in our past. In a nation where 12% of the population is African-American, can we embrace a man who would hold that group as chattel, wringing a living from the sweat of their brow?⁵

Add to that the mounting evidence of Jefferson's relationship with Sally Hemings and the matter becomes further complicated. It was during his first term in the White House that rumors started to fly about a sexual relationship with Hemings. John Callender, a political muckraker whom Jefferson had urged to attack the Federalists, turned his guns on Jefferson, claiming the President had fathered children with Sally in his days as master of Monticello.⁶ Jefferson tacitly denied the charge, but the rumors persisted for more than 200 years, driven by the oral history passed down by the Hemings family. Many historians dismissed the claims, until in 1998 Dr. Eugene Foster of the University of Virginia undertook a test comparing DNA from Hemings and Jefferson heirs. While the test could not narrow the field beyond Jefferson and his brother Randolph and their male descendants, the findings proved that at least one of Hemings' children was a descendant of the Jefferson family.⁷ In the face of this evidence it is hard to refute the claims that Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings had carried on a sexual affair. Hence, Jefferson not only fathered children with a slave mistress – whether in a loving relationship or a case of slave rape is hotly debated – but he held the children of that relationship in bondage as well. If slavery itself is the indelible stain on America's soul, the enslavement of what many termed “shadow children” is perhaps the rip in the fabric of our nation's ideals. How could a man who believes in the ideals of liberty and natural rights hold his own mulatto children as slaves?

⁵ “Profiles of General Demographic Characteristics 2000.” United States. Census Bureau. *2000 Census of Population and Housing*. 24 July 2006. <<http://www.census.gov/prod/cen2000/doc/ProfilesTD.pdf>>

⁶ *Ibid*, 155.

⁷ Ellis, Joseph J. *American Sphinx: The Character of Thomas Jefferson* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996) 24-25.

This is enough to condemn the man in the eyes of many historians, however Jefferson's image receives its direst blow from his own words on race and slavery. Jefferson declares in his *Notes on the State of Virginia* "the blacks... are inferior to the whites in the endowments both of body and mind."⁸ This statement is preceded by a detailed account of ways in which African-Americans are deemed less thoughtful, less artistic, and less reflective than their white counterparts. Jefferson complains about the "strong and disagreeable odour" of working slaves.⁹ The man who most likely fathered several mulatto children with Sally Hemings even goes so far as to warn against mixing the races. He declares of whites, "their amalgamation with the other color produces a degradation to which no lover of his country, no lover of excellence in the human character can innocently consent."¹⁰

Jefferson clearly believed that the differences between white and black Americans are natural differences in the constitution of the races. This contention that blacks are incapable of deep thought and understanding and given more to passion than whites is perpetuated by slaveholders of the antebellum south who point out the beneficial role of slaveholders as patriarchs for a childlike race of enslaved Africans. To combat this view of Jefferson as a racist, some historians have accurately pointed out that Thomas Jefferson was one of the earliest voices for emancipation in America. While it is true that Jefferson's draft of the Declaration of Independence condemned King George for permitting slavery in the colonies and some of his later writings called for an end to slavery in the United States, Jefferson never took public action to push for emancipation and never freed the mass of his own slaves. In fact, Jefferson's private plan of emancipation called for expatriation of slaves from America to be resettled in a colony in Africa. Jefferson, much as in his earlier arguments about the inferiority of blacks, feared that the

⁸ Peterson, Merrill, ed. *Thomas Jefferson Writings* (New York: Library of America, 1984) 270.

⁹ *Ibid*, 265.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 1345.

passions of formerly enslaved African-Americans would boil over into a race war. “We have the wolf by the ear,” he wrote John Holmes in 1820, “and we can neither hold him nor safely let him go.”¹¹ It was clear to Jefferson that if blacks were to be free, they would have to be free somewhere other than America.

Jefferson then was a champion of liberty who was party to keeping thousands of enslaved Africans in bondage throughout the early days of the American republic. Given these differing views of Thomas Jefferson, can we still think of the founding father as an American hero? We must first ask, what the term “hero” actually means. The preeminent American text on the English language, Webster’s Dictionary, defines a hero as “a mythological or legendary figure often of divine descent endowed with great strength or ability”.¹² This definition points us in the direction of some superhuman being reaching the pinnacle of perfection. Yet this is the definition that many hold heroic figures to. It is believed that heroes must be flawless. They must embody our greatest virtues with none of our vices. There is no room for greed or materialism, jealousy or pettiness, prejudice, frailty, or despair. This of course is an unrealistic definition. Given this understanding of the term, the world would have no heroes, for even great men fall short and suffer from the defects inherent in existence as a human being. A better definition can be gleaned from the opening pages of *A Call to Heroism* by Dr. Peter Gibbon. In the book Gibbon explains the word from its Greek roots, where it referred to demigods: “Offspring of a divine parent and a mortal parent, the heroes of Greek mythology were less than gods but greater than ordinary humans.”¹³ Gibbon goes on to point out that although the term referred to a cross between mortals and gods, the gods of the Greek age were flawed beings themselves. “They are not

¹¹ Ibid, 1434.

¹² Merriam-Webster OnLine. 25 July 2006. <<http://www.m-w.com>>

¹³ Gibbon, Peter. *A Call to Heroism: Renewing America’s Vision of Greatness* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2002) 4.

perfect, but rather hot-tempered, jealous, and fickle, taking sides in human events and feuding among themselves.”¹⁴

The answer to our question of whether Thomas Jefferson can be a hero then, lies in which definition of hero one chooses. If one uses the former definition, in which heroes are perfect beings without flaw, Jefferson clearly falls short. However given this understanding of heroes, it seems to me that you can only condemn Jefferson for his shortcomings if you do the same to other great historical figures. If you strip Jefferson of the title hero because he wallowed in the muck of slavery, you must do the same to George Washington. John and Samuel Adams, John Hancock, and Benjamin Franklin must be condemned for failing to make equal rights for women and blacks a central issue at the nation’s inception. Abraham Lincoln must be toppled from his pedestal, given his racist views of blacks as inferior beings. Franklin Roosevelt must be penalized for overseeing a segregated military during the darkest days of WWII. John F. Kennedy must be rebuked for his reliance on prescription painkillers. Even Martin Luther King Jr. cannot be a hero given this understanding of the term, due to his record of marital infidelity. This understanding of the term hero leaves us painfully short on examples of truly heroic individuals. By excluding individuals due to their flaws and weaknesses, this definition leaves us completely void of heroes, for no one can achieve the status of perfection it requires.

I prefer to use the latter definition of hero, in which ordinary men accomplish extraordinary things. In this vein, Jefferson can remain a hero. For while we must take note of his shortcomings and character flaws, we must also hold him up for the accomplishments that were so heroic. Jefferson gave us the ideals that founded a nation that would rule itself – a novel idea in the 18th century. He set forth the foundation from which women, racial minorities, and homosexuals argued for equal rights and freedoms in later years. Thomas Jefferson is proof that

¹⁴ Gibbon, 6.

in the words of R.B. Bernstein, “flawed, imperfect human beings can, none the less, achieve great things.”¹⁵ The real Thomas Jefferson then, can be a hero or a villain. The determination comes in who holds the scales of history.

¹⁵ Bernstein, Richard B. “Thomas Jefferson: Personality, Character, and Public Life.” National Endowment for the Humanities, Boston. 27 July 2006.

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