

“Let not the name of George the third be a blot on the page of history... It behoves you therefore to think and act for yourself and for your people. The great principles of right and wrong are legible to every reader; to pursue them requires not the aid of many counsellors. The whole art of government consists of the art of being honest. Only aim to do your duty, and you will succeed where others have failed.”<sup>1</sup> – *Summary View*

To say that the history classrooms of the United States have changed since the dawn of the 1970's is to engage in massive understatement. The study of history has undergone an era of change. Today's historians and history teachers are faced with an age where many previously unquestioned aspects of the past are being re-examined, sometimes with a much more critical eye. This includes the people of history that in the past have been revered by many as heroes. Those that participated in the American Revolution and the formation of the early American republic are not immune to this phenomenon. It is into this debate that history teachers step when they consider the character of Thomas Jefferson, and how to approach the teaching of Thomas Jefferson in their classrooms.

Prior to the 1960's, history was presented to students in the United States not as a series of questions, but as a series of correct answers that glorified members of the elite. This narrative not only ran parallel to, but served to reinforce, American archetypes of the past. This history was written about the elites of American society in an unquestionably positive light. The writers of this

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<sup>1</sup> Bernstein, R B. Thomas Jefferson. New York: Oxford UP, 2003. 24.

history were mainly, if not exclusively, white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant men. Their scholarship reflected their perspective.

In the 1970's this approach to history began to be widely questioned. This questioning can be best encapsulated into what critics might label revisionism- the idea that history might be more accurate, relevant, and useful to human society if the field were to be expanded to include Native Americans, women, minority groups, and most importantly the poor and oppressed of the world.

This idea, what Eric Foner famously referred to as “rethinking the past”, was and is perceived by many in the United States to be dangerous and irresponsible. Critics of the recent expansion of the field of history might refer to historical analysis that falls into the category of revisionism as “Presentism.”<sup>2</sup> To these people, revisionism and Presentism are ahistorical, flawed, and dangerous ideas that responsible historians and teachers of history should do their best to avoid. The chief charge levied against such scholars is that they are doing a fundamental injustice to those that came before them by “taking them out of their historical context” and judging them by “the standards of the present.” It is into this mix of ideas that history teachers are trying to operate their classrooms.

Students are entering history classrooms with a wide range of preconceived opinions about history and historical figures. Historical analysis is dangerous to the legacy of people that once were the unquestioned heroes of the American civilization. What if a student rejects John D. Rockefeller and idolizes Mother Jones? What if students reject Woodrow Wilson and turn to Eugene Debs? Historical analysis is dangerous to the legacy of people that were previously the

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<sup>2</sup> Ellis, Joseph J. American Sphinx: the Character of Thomas Jefferson. New York: Alfred a. Knopf, 1997. 5.

unquestioned heroes of the American civilization. This is dangerous in the eyes of the elite because it makes students more likely to begin to question injustice in their world. It has proven to be particularly dangerous to the legacy of Thomas Jefferson. Balanced and reasonable analysis provides teachers and students an opportunity to engage in rethinking the past with the aim of finding a historically appropriate way to remember the character of Thomas Jefferson.

Many are dismayed by how low Thomas Jefferson's public image has fallen since the beginning of the 1970's. He is, after all, a man that put together quite an impressive list of accomplishments; he was the author of the Declaration of Independence, founder of the University of Virginia, a two term President of the United States, the executor of the endlessly significant Louisiana Purchase, as well as a pioneer of religious freedom. But the list of where Jefferson falls short is as dubious as his list of accomplishments is impressive; among other things he was a slave owner who was convinced free slaves could never peacefully integrate into American society, a man who almost undoubtedly produced children with at least one of his slaves, a man who destroyed his wife's health through endless pregnancy, and man who contrived to financially ruin Native American chiefs through debt.<sup>3</sup> Both of these lists are incomplete.

So what are the teachers of the United States to do when a child asks us about these negative attributes? Isn't this just a man acting inside his own historical context? This is an enormous challenge. Certainly you don't want to discount the inspiring and wonderful things that Jefferson left for us both as US

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<sup>3</sup> "President Jefferson and the Indian Nations." Monticello Thomas Jefferson Wiki. 12 Mar. 2008. 27 July 2008 <[http://wiki.monticello.org/mediawiki/index.php/american\\_indians](http://wiki.monticello.org/mediawiki/index.php/american_indians)>.

citizens and as citizens of the world. But it would be just as irresponsible to offer Jefferson a blank check in the name of fairness to his time period. It is critically important that we identify his inconsistencies without delving into apologetics.

A balanced look at Jefferson reveals a man whose central contradictions were between his social status and the ramifications of his political beliefs. Jefferson was not the most conservative Virginia planter. He was publicly liberal on issues as long as that was deemed acceptable to his social class. He was never publicly the revolutionary or radical that he has been styled by many generations of historians, although it is possible that some of his private convictions were radical. These contradictions can best be examined through Jefferson's opinions on slavery, on education, and through his private struggle with debt.

Slavery has been the dominant issue when it comes to the rethinking of Jefferson in our time period. Jefferson's ownership of human beings has been widely accepted, but until recently de-emphasized. Even into the 1970's, tour guides at Monticello would have referred to them as his servants, not his slaves.<sup>4</sup> Jefferson viewed the situation with growing pessimism over the course of his lifetime. Despite the men who showed him otherwise, Jefferson maintained that it was impossible for slaves to be emancipated, unless they were to be deported. He could not envision free blacks integrating into white society without bloodshed. This is what he articulated about slavery when he wrote that white society "had the wolf by the ears."<sup>5</sup> This de-emphasis of the issue of slavery had much to do with the biases of historians that established Jefferson's mid twentieth century

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<sup>4</sup> Bernstein, R B. Institute Lecture. 17 July 2008.

<sup>5</sup> Bernstein, 185.

reputation as a champion of democracy and civilization. Today, Jefferson's slaveholding is on the table as it never has been before. Jefferson as a slaveholder provides a stark contradiction with the political beliefs espoused in the Declaration of Independence. But is not this aspect of his character easily explained by putting him in the context of late eighteenth-century Virginia?

The reasonable answer is in fact, no. If one person is shocked by the injustice and morally indefensible institution of slavery in a time period, then is that thought itself a product of that time period? Those that choose to explain away Jefferson's slave owning can not responsibly suggest he was incapable of thinking otherwise. After all, Richard Randolph, Robert Carter, Edward Coles, and George Washington were all Virginia planters that freed their slaves during Jefferson's lifetime.<sup>6</sup> Why were they not imprisoned by their time period? How could Patrick Henry note the injustice of a war for independence waged by a class of slave owners?<sup>7</sup> Is the more reasonable answer that people from every time period commit injustices with the full knowledge that they are doing so? It is with this new, more complete understanding of Thomas Jefferson in mind that teachers grapple with how to present his character to students of the twenty-first century. So what then, do we do when it comes to the question of Jefferson's character? What we must do, with great care, is measure the heroic aspects of his accomplishments with the bad, and challenge students to decide what Thomas Jefferson means for them. How do we reconcile this approach to Jefferson with his authorship of the Declaration of Independence?

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<sup>6</sup> Bernstein, R B. Institute Lecture. 17 July 2008.

<sup>7</sup> Loewen, James W. Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong. New York: Touchstone, 1995. 148.

It is important to consider what those words meant to Jefferson when he wrote them. The most quoted verse from the document (“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal”) was certainly not the most significant part to the people of the late 1700’s. The most debated and most significant part of the Declaration at that time was the long list of colonial grievances that Jefferson was making available to colonists and the world with the aim of convincing readers the rebellion was just.<sup>8</sup> If teachers guide students to understand that Jefferson probably had no idea what his words were going to mean to future generations, he starts to become much more understandable.

This central contradiction can also be viewed through Jefferson’s beliefs on education. Jefferson viewed education as a most fundamental form of individual protection.<sup>9</sup> However, Jefferson was also convinced that formal education should only be something offered to those he felt were capable. This made Jefferson a firm believer in, as he would say, a natural aristocracy. “For I agree with you [Adams] that there is a natural aristocracy among men.”<sup>10</sup> Here, as with the slavery issue, Jefferson’s central contradiction between the ramifications of his political beliefs and his class status becomes glaring. He was a man who was a product of the Virginia landed aristocracy arguing for what can be best described as a meritocracy. A true meritocracy would threaten the very existence of a landed gentry.

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<sup>8</sup> Ellis, 51.

<sup>9</sup> Coates, Sr., Eyeler R. "40. Thomas Jefferson on Education." Thomas Jefferson on Politics and Government. 1999. University of Virginia. 22 July 2008 <<http://etext.virginia.edu/jefferson/quotations/jeff1370.htm>>.

<sup>10</sup> Jefferson, Thomas, 1743-1826, Letters." The Natural Aristocracy. University of Virginia. 27 July 2008 <<http://etext.virginia.edu/etcbin/toccernew2?id=jeflett.sgm&images=images/modeng&data=/texts/english/modeng/parsed&tag=public&part=221&division=div1>>.

The very forces that Jefferson unleashed through authoring the Declaration began the historical process that would ultimately doom his way of life. Jefferson had no idea that future leaders like Lincoln, King, and countless revolutionaries around the world would invoke his document to demand emancipation of slaves, political equality, democratic government, and the destruction of the colonial order.

Like almost all of the Virginia planters in his time, he had been steadily accruing debt throughout his lifetime. These debts still had the flavor of the classic mercantilistic relationship between the fluid capital of Europe and the raw material producers of the former colonies. “Jefferson was a victim of the painful paradox that beset nearly all of Virginia’s gentleman farmers. The social and economic forces that they had helped to create had undermined the genteel, ordered world into which they had been born, and made life as they knew it and wanted to live it all but impossible.”<sup>11</sup> Ultimately, the ideals of the American Revolution could not be only limited to the American elite. “The new democratic world that he envisioned had dwindling room for the dignified, elegant, free-spending gentleman farmers who, he hoped, would govern the world.”<sup>12</sup>

The above is merely one analysis of how Jefferson can be presented in a classroom. The most important thing to remember about teaching history today is that the responsibilities of a Social Studies teacher do not end with presentation of history as a series of answers to questions. The most important thing that teachers must do with Jefferson, as with other figures from history, is teach children how

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<sup>11</sup> Bernstein, 188.

<sup>12</sup> Bernstein, 190.

to decide for themselves what Jefferson means to them. A great way to present Jefferson would be to involve students in the process of history itself. How many children are taught by their middle or high school history teachers that history is in fact an evolving discipline?

Two essential questions can guide teachers through this process. The first question to pose could be “How do we as a society remember Jefferson?” Students and teachers can then embark on a quest to gather information from society on Jefferson to see how he is being presented. What do his memorials suggest about him? What does the textbook say about him? What do members of the community identify him with? Unfortunately, students and teachers will most likely be disappointed to find that the archetypes cast prior to the 1960’s are still alive and strong in the American public mind. Subscribers to the idea of revisionism have a great deal of work to do to make their contribution to the field of history secure.

When students become immersed, they will begin to think about the next question, “How should we remember Jefferson?” Here, students can begin working to make a positive change by formulating their interpretation of Jefferson. This is something that involves research, primary sources, discussion, debate, and a great deal of care from the teacher. Students should be encouraged to think for themselves, but also reminded that their scholarship needs to be responsible and credible. Students could propose a new memorial of Jefferson that might present him in ways that move beyond archetype. Students could write a letter to the



editor of a newspaper on Jefferson's birthday discussing the way he has been remembered. Students could organize their own exhibit to display to classmates.

The final piece is less important than the process. Teachers of American history must present their students with history as a series of arguments that have been changing, and not as a series of right answers to questions. When a teacher takes this risk, they will be rewarded with authentic student work that has the possibility of creating broader positive social change to combat the discredited interpretations of the past.