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NEH Summer Institute for Teachers: Thomas Jefferson – Personality, Character, and Public Life

July 9 – August 4, 2006

Statement of Purpose

I have chosen not to compose a curriculum unit, powerpoint presentation, or curriculum unit for my project. Instead, my project will be an academic essay comparing the personalities of the third president of the United States, Thomas Jefferson, with the forty-second president of the United States, William Jefferson Clinton. This essay will speak to two of the larger questions of the institute. Those two questions are: Is the intimate life knowable? And Does it connect to the public man or woman? Also, my essay will indirectly address one of the pedagogical questions of the institute – What role should biography and primary sources play in history instruction?

My final reason for undertaking this type of project is a more practical one. I currently teach world history to ninth and tenth graders at an all-male college preparatory school. My task these past four years and this upcoming year has been to cover world history chronologically from the year 1000 to the present day. In the past I have spent one day, if that, discussing Thomas Jefferson. This past year, my students watched an approximately twenty-minute clip from the documentary of Jefferson completed by Ken Burns. While watching the documentary, I required students to fill in a question sheet. I chose the excerpt I did because I believed it was effective in explaining the significance of the *Declaration of Independence* in world history. Jefferson viewed the document as being a turning point in world history and so should all students. However, it is difficult for many of them because they only view in the context of American history, and not the impact it had and continues to have around the globe. While I will most likely continue to use this lesson, I want to also use this essay as a point of departure for my students in the process of understanding historical figures.

I hope by reading this essay and through the use of other resources, my students will realize not only the complexity of figures such as Jefferson and Clinton, but how that complexity is also a sign of how human they are. My essay focuses on the both Jefferson and Clinton's penchant for compartmentalizing, meaning the separating of different arenas of one's life into isolated compartments. For example, my behavior differs based on whether I am in the classroom or am out of the classroom. I am mild-mannered and low key as a teacher, but as a coach, I am intense, demanding, and more easily angered. I hope by either reading this essay or studying other historical figures my students will see some of themselves and perhaps their tendency to compartmentalize. It is in many ways a natural human tendency. I am not trying to put my students through a session of psychotherapy, but I do hope they see similarities between their personalities and those of Jefferson, Clinton, or Napoleon. Finding that shared humanity helps students know the intimate life of the subject they are studying and appreciate not only that subject's complexity, but their own as well. I believe exploring that complexity will lead to asking questions. For example, how could Napoleon claim he believed in spreading the ideas of liberty, equality, and fraternity, and yet crown himself an emperor and impose tyrannical restrictions on the people of France, such as limiting freedom of the press? Asking questions is a sign of being thoughtful, a trait I want to develop in all of my students.

The Compartmentalizers: Examining the Personalities of Thomas Jefferson and  
William Jefferson Clinton

By

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Thomas Jefferson: Personality, Character, and Public Life

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Professor Peter Gibbon and Mrs. Joan Musbach

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A major theme of this institute has been to examine not only the intimate life of Thomas Jefferson, but the relationship between his intimate life, or private life, and his public life. Institute attendees have benefited from their access to Jefferson's own writings as well as to a rich and diverse composition of scholarly works on Jefferson.<sup>1</sup> The volumes upon volumes of work completed on America's third president have increased the understanding of Jefferson while simultaneously thickening the veil draped over him. Scholars have claimed sides, with some proclaiming he is a "sphinx" and is simply "impenetrable."<sup>2</sup> Others have argued that while the Jefferson puzzle cannot ever be fully solved, there is still room for a greater understanding of him and still plenty of significant questions to ask.<sup>3</sup>

This brief essay does not fall on either side of this debate, but rather is a comparison of Jefferson with the man who would ascend to the presidency almost two hundred years after Jefferson finally left public office. While not contributing to the scholarly debate, this essay does acknowledge implicitly that the intimate, or inner life, of Jefferson and William (Bill) Jefferson Clinton is decipherable to some degree. The ability of both men to compartmentalize, along with their views of the relationship between their public and private lives, impacts their presidential tenures both negatively and positively. Contemporary synonyms for the act of compartmentalizing include denial

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<sup>1</sup> Institute members read and evaluated Jefferson's writings in Merrill D. Peterson, ed., *Thomas Jefferson: Writings* (New York: Library of America, 1984). Secondary works offered to members included those of Joyce Appleby, Richard B. Bernstein, Joseph J. Ellis, Peter Gibbon, Peter Hatch, Jan Lewis, Annette Gordon-Reed, and Lucia Stanton on topics ranging from Jefferson and democracy, Jefferson and character, Jefferson and retirement, Jefferson and heroism, Jefferson and family, and Jefferson and slavery. The institute also benefited from a visit by Professor Peter S. Onuf of the University of Virginia, who spoke on Jefferson and slavery.

<sup>2</sup> See introductions in Joseph J. Ellis, *American Sphinx: The Character of Thomas Jefferson* (New York: Vintage, 1996), and Merrill D. Peterson, *Thomas Jefferson and the New Nation: A Biography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970).

<sup>3</sup> These comments can be attributed to Merrill D. Peterson's successor at the University of Virginia, Professor Peter S. Onuf. These comments were made during his visit of Tuesday, July 25, 2006, to the Institute.

and hypocrisy. It is true that Jefferson and Clinton engaged in both of these acts quite frequently. However, it is also true that the ability of both men to separate aspects of their private lives from aspects of their public lives helped them to navigate the intensely partisan nature of their terms in office and made both men effective presidents.

Aside from their ability to compartmentalize, significant similarities exist between Thomas Jefferson and Bill Clinton. These similarities allowed both men to not only accept their contradictory thoughts and actions, but also helped them look past these “flaws” and remain committed public servants. Both Jefferson and Clinton possessed superior intellects combined with supreme powers of concentration. Jefferson referred to himself as a “hard student” who preferred reading and study over letter writing.<sup>4</sup> Clinton had a masterly grasp of policy and a photographic memory that allowed him to remember phone numbers he had not dialed in thirty years.<sup>5</sup> Although he was easily distracted, Clinton’s concentration came from his ability to compartmentalize. For example, just six days after the story of his affair with White House intern, Monica Lewinsky, broke in the press, Clinton displayed confidence and strength while giving his State of the Union Address. Even Bob Livingston, a Republican congressional leader at the time, praised the President’s speech.<sup>6</sup> Clinton’s political skill was on display six months later in his first presidential trip to China. The trip was a huge success because of the energy and passion displayed by the President. Clinton did not appear to be a man fighting for his political life. John Harris, a political biographer of Clinton, offered this analysis of the trip:

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<sup>4</sup> Thomas Jefferson to Dr. Vine Utley, 21 March 1819, in Peterson, 1416.

<sup>5</sup> David Maraniss, *The Clinton Enigma* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998), 42.

<sup>6</sup> John F. Harris, *The Survivor: Bill Clinton in the White House* (New York: Random House, 2005), 311-312.

These impressive displays of discipline and focus put a new word in Washington currency: “compartmentalization.” This was supposedly the president’s great skill. “In the gaudy mansions of Clinton’s mind, there are many rooms,” explained *Time* magazine. The seamy private problems in one room were not allowed to mingle with the vital public problems in the others. Around the capital, legislators, diplomats, and commentators all marveled: How did he do it?<sup>7</sup>

Despite the dark political and personal clouds hanging over him, Clinton successfully completed a foreign trip of invaluable strategic importance to the United States.

Both Jefferson and Clinton’s capacity for work helped both men deal with adverse circumstances, especially Jefferson. On more than one occasion, Jefferson’s return to public life would help him deal with personal tragedy. Jefferson’s public work became a good distraction from his private grief. In late 1782, Jefferson was still mourning the death of his beloved wife, Martha, when the Continental Congress appointed him to the delegation assigned to negotiate a peace treaty with Great Britain. Although he did not end up going overseas, the offer rekindled his interest in foreign affairs and the call to serve his country again boosted his spirits. Two years later, his obligations as minister plenipotentiary to France helped him cope with the death of his two-year old daughter Lucy from the whooping cough.<sup>8</sup> Unlike Jefferson, who always portrayed himself as reluctantly returning to public life, despite repeated claims he wanted to remain at Monticello amongst his books, his family, and his farm, Clinton relished his time in office. He truly did love being president and in his own words acknowledged as such, proclaiming, “I never ceased to be thrilled by it all.”<sup>9</sup> Clinton also dealt with difficult personal circumstances by fulfilling his public obligations. He did not allow his personal failures to distract him from his public responsibility; a responsibility, like Jefferson, to

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<sup>7</sup> Qtd. in Harris, 326.

<sup>8</sup> Richard B. Bernstein, *Thomas Jefferson* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 52-53, 56.

<sup>9</sup> Bill Clinton, *My Life* (New York: Vintage, 2004), 919, 950.

which he was deeply committed.<sup>10</sup> Clinton resolved early during the impeachment proceedings that by continuing to stay focused on his job as president, he would eventually outlast and defeat his political enemies.<sup>11</sup>

The most important similarity between Clinton and Jefferson was both men's optimism and hopeful outlook for the future. One of Jefferson's core beliefs was that the future would be better than the past because humanity would continue to progress. Jefferson's belief in progress set him in sharp contrast to his contemporary and predecessor to the presidency, John Adams. Both men had read about the pitfalls of republican government. It was a system of government easily susceptible to internal fighting or external conflict with both likelihoods leading to the demise of the republic. The other major flaw of republican government was that it was only applicable to a small territory, the inhabitants of which had common and overlapping interests. Jefferson both acknowledged and refuted these assessments at the same time because "he believed that and hoped that somehow the Americans were immune from the historical forces that had overwhelmed the republics and republican empires of the Old World."<sup>12</sup> This idealistic and optimistic view was evident in Jefferson's first inaugural address:

I know, indeed, that some honest men fear that a republican government Can not be strong, that this Government is not strong enough; but would The honest patriot, in the full tide of successful experiment, abandon a Government which has so far kept us free and firm on the theoretic and Visionary fear that this Government, *the world's best hope*, may by Possibility want energy to preserve itself? I trust not. I believe this, on the Contrary, the strongest Government on earth.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Harris, 338.

<sup>11</sup> Clinton, 837-38.

<sup>12</sup> Richard B. Bernstein, "The Intellectual World of Thomas Jefferson," 2006 NEH Institute Lecture, July 12, 2006, 8-9.

<sup>13</sup> Thomas Jefferson, First Inaugural Address, 4 March 1801, in Peterson, 493. Emphasis added by author.

Jefferson was an ardent believer in that the American experiment in republican government would go against the tide of the history of republican governments and serve as a beacon to the rest of the world.

After eight years as president in a deeply divided and antagonistic political climate, Bill Clinton maintained the sense of optimism and hope that encouraged him to enter public life in the first place. Clinton's belief in the future was the product of both internal and external factors. His ability to compartmentalize his life helped him remain optimistic under adverse circumstances. This ability also explains why he was able to recover from the many setbacks he encountered in his life, both politically and personally.<sup>14</sup> Externally, Clinton derived his belief in the promise of the future directly from the classroom. As a freshman at Georgetown University, he took a class entitled Development of Civilizations with Professor Carroll Quigley. Quigley argued that Western civilization's key to greatness was its possession of a trait he called "future preference." He defined "future preference" as the belief that "the future can better than the past, and each individual has a personal, moral obligation to make it so." Quigley's insight would serve as a theme Clinton referred to often during his two terms in office.<sup>15</sup>

A final noteworthy point of comparison between Jefferson and Clinton is how both men dealt with the personal scandals that arose during their respective terms. Both men were astute observers of the times in which they lived and both fully understood the political culture of their day. These attributes along with their ability to compartmentalize helped both men survive politically. Jefferson obtained the office of president during arguably the most politically acrimonious period in American history.

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<sup>14</sup> Clinton, 919; Maraniss, 55.

<sup>15</sup> Clinton, 78.

In the election campaign of 1800, Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton published a pamphlet describing then President John Adams as mentally unstable and incapable of governing. Adam's predecessor, George Washington, fell prey to claims of senility during his second term as well as the outlandish claim that he favored Hamilton because Hamilton was secretly his illegitimate son. Hamilton himself was not above reproach. He had to acknowledge his guilt in having an affair with a married woman. The press of Jefferson's time did not distinguish between what could and could not be published about public figures. Both Jefferson's public and private life were fair game.

The most slanderous charge against Jefferson came from the pen of James Callender, the editor of the *Richmond Recorder*. In an act of political retribution, Callender published a story in 1802 claiming that Jefferson had engaged in an illicit affair with one of his slaves, Sally Hemings. A product of this affair was a son Tom who bore a "striking resemblance" to the president. Jefferson never commented directly on the charges and his lack of response amounted to a denial. Jefferson's silence on the matter was a politically shrewd move for it prevented his political enemies, the Federalist, from obtaining any traction both politically and with the public. It was also clear that the public was more concerned with Jefferson's performance as president. Jefferson had an incredibly successful first term, which included several noteworthy accomplishments such as paying down the national debt, eliminating taxes, and expanding the size of United States exponentially with the acquisition of the Louisiana Territory from Napoleon in 1803. Jefferson suffered little, if any, politically from the accusations made by Callender.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Joseph J. Ellis, *American Sphinx: The Character of Thomas Jefferson* (New York: Vintage, 1996), 254-261. The authoritative study on the politics of the early American Republic is Joanne B. Freeman *Affairs of*

Bill Clinton acknowledged early in his life that he was a man of multiple personas. He described himself as having “parallel lives, an external life that takes its natural course and an internal life where the secrets are hidden.”<sup>17</sup> Like Jefferson, Clinton was intensely persecuted both politically and personally. Perhaps no sitting president suffered from more attacks by both the press and his political enemies. Clinton was constantly under siege beginning with the 1992 presidential campaign and ending with the impeachment proceedings of 1999 and the subsequent closure of the nearly six-year Whitewater investigation, at a cost of \$70 million. What hurt Clinton was that unlike Jefferson, the seven-day, twenty-four hours a day news revolution arose during his time in office. Clinton’s dirty laundry was always being discussed. What helped Clinton was that the public believed more strongly during his presidency that the private life of public figures was off limits to the press. It was the leading of “parallel lives” that both hurt and helped Clinton during the most difficult year of his presidency, 1998, the year allegations arose of his affair with Monica Lewinsky.

The one miscalculation Clinton made was denying the affair initially in January of 1998. His denial, part of living his “parallel lives,” further increased the suspicion that he was misleading the public. Clinton did not realize how persistent both the press and his Republican counterparts would be in their prosecution of the Lewinsky story. On the other hand, Clinton’s denial did allow him to go on doing his job as president. For example, he was still able to focus on national security issues. He both contemplated,

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*Honor: National Politics in the New Republic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001). It is worth noting that Jefferson did eventually admit to one act of indiscretion. He admitted that he did attempt to “seduce” a married woman, the wife of John Walker. Jefferson acknowledged in a letter in 1805 that the Walker allegation was the only truthful claim leveled against him. This information can be found in R. B. Bernstein’s *Thomas Jefferson*, pages 155-156. Bernstein’s work is cited fully in an earlier note.

<sup>17</sup> Clinton, 149.

discussed, and launched a missile attack on an Al Qaeda training camp in Afghanistan all while having to testify before the grand jury and make a nationally televised address where he admitted he had initially lied about his relationship with Monica Lewinsky. Clinton's personal transgression and his subsequent denial were inexplicable blunders. He had hurt not only his family, but also the institution of the presidency. However, his ability to continue doing his job as president saved him from removal from office. Like Jefferson, Clinton also benefited from a supportive public that did not abandon him.<sup>18</sup>

Compartmentalizing their lives made both Thomas Jefferson and Bill Clinton effective presidents, even during the most trying of circumstances. Also, both men craved the support and adulation of the public. It was this support that was critical to their political survival. Upon retiring from the presidency, Jefferson wrote,"

But the enormity of the times in which I have lived, have forced me to Commit myself on the boisterous ocean of political passions. I thank God for the opportunity of retirement from them without censure, and Carrying with me the most consoling proofs of public approbation.<sup>19</sup>

Perhaps with a more positive view of the skill of compartmentalization, both Thomas Jefferson and Bill Clinton will continue to be held in high esteem by the majority of the public for generations to come.

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<sup>18</sup> Clinton, 775, 811, 845.

<sup>19</sup> Thomas Jefferson to P.S. Dupont de Nemours, 2 March 1809, in Peterson, 1203.

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