Thomas Jefferson

Thomas Jefferson wrote the lines inscribed on his tombstone, listing the three accomplishments of which he was most proud: "Here was buried Thomas Jefferson, author of the Declaration of Independence and the Virginia Statute of Religious Freedom, and the father of the University of Virginia." It is a modest epitaph for a man who founded a major political party and served as minister to France, governor of Virginia, secretary of state, vice president, and president of the United States. He was also an accomplished writer, lawyer, farmer, naturalist, architect, musician, linguist, philosopher, scientist, geographer, surveyor, botanist, ethnologist, and paleontologist.

Jefferson was born on April 13, 1743, into a prominent family at Shadwell plantation in Albemarle County, Virginia. He graduated from the College of William and Mary in 1762 and was admitted to the bar in 1767 after an exceptionally thorough preparation in legal theory. Until the outbreak of the American Revolution, Jefferson lived the life of a wealthy Virginia aristocrat. He practiced law, married Martha Wayles Skelton on January 1, 1772, began the construction of his mansion at Monticello, and served variously as magistrate, county lieutenant, and member of the Virginia House of Burgesses (1769–1775).

As the crisis intensified between Great Britain and its American colonies, there was no doubt in Jefferson's mind about the right of colonists to refuse to obey the decrees of the British Parliament. In A Summary View of the Rights of British America, a pamphlet prepared for the Virginia convention in 1774, he argued that under English law the legal precedents of emigration and natural rights meant that the colonies owed allegiance to the king but did not have to obey Parliament in matters of taxation or trade.

A tall, lanky, and shy man, Jefferson impressed his colleagues through the quality of the written committee reports he prepared rather than by his speeches. As a member of the Second Continental Congress, Jefferson, along with Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, Roger Sherman, and Robert R. Livingston, was asked to draw up a declaration of independence. The completed document was composed from ideas suggested by the committee members and the congress. Jefferson actually wrote the text, contributing the impassioned and stirring prose that continues to inspire Americans. The vision of a world in which all people are treated equally regardless of their birth, class, or status and in which governments exist to improve the quality of life of their citizens, not to control them, still serves as a model for oppressed people around the world.

Jefferson resigned from the congress in September 1776 to serve in the Virginia House of Delegates and to be closer to his family. He concentrated his energies for the next several years on trying to institutionalize his ideas of political and religious freedom in Virginia. He believed that a social revolution as well as a war with Great Britain for independence needed to occur. His goal was to create a meritocracy, a society in which a natural aristocracy based on talent and merit rather than wealth and birth would lead. Although he was disappointed by the results of his efforts in Virginia, he did manage to have all the feudal aspects of land ownership in Virginia abolished. He also led the successful effort to end government support for the Anglican church.

Jefferson's most famous single bills were for Establishing Religious Freedom (introduced in 1779 but not adopted until 1786), which provided for the separation of church and state; and a Bill for the More General Diffusion of
Knowledge to create a public education system (which was never adopted as he envisioned).

Jefferson was elected governor in 1779 and was in office when Virginia was devastated by the invasion of the British in 1780 and 1781. He was blamed for the lack of Virginia's ability to defend itself, even though the restrictions on the powers of the office had given him little authority to act. After his term ended in 1781, a legislative inquiry cleared him of all charges of dereliction of duty, but Jefferson was so humiliated that he decided to retire from public life. He might have remained secluded at Monticello, but the death of his wife in September 1782 drove him to seek escape from his grief through work.

Jefferson returned to the Continental Congress in 1783 and served there until he was appointed a special commissioner to France in 1784 and then minister to France in 1785. His most notable accomplishment in Congress was securing adoption of the decimal system of coinage. His Report of Government for the Western Territory, in which he advocated prohibiting slavery in all western territories, became the foundation for the Northwest Ordinance of 1787.

Jefferson remained in Paris as Franklin's successor until 1789. While in Paris, his Notes on the State of Virginia (1781), a highly respected natural history that established his reputation in Europe as a scientist, was published. It was from Paris that Jefferson reviewed the newly written Constitution and added his support to the need for amendments (the Bill of Rights) to ensure adequate protection of individual liberties. Before his return to the United States, Jefferson witnessed the early stages of the French Revolution. He could not hide his enthusiasm for the principles heralded in the revolt or his support for the moderate factions led by such men as the Marquis de Lafayette.

Shortly after Jefferson's return to the United States in 1789, President George Washington asked him to become secretary of state. Jefferson reluctantly agreed and served in that post until the end of Washington's first term in 1793. It was during this period that the bitter rivalry began between Jefferson and Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton, which led to the formation of two major political parties in America: the Democratic-Republicans and the Federalists.

Jefferson's fears about the dangers of a strong central government, his desire to protect small farmers—the people he believed constituted the foundation of a republic—and his wish to forge a close political bond with France were not shared by Hamilton. Hamilton advocated interpreting the Constitution broadly, or loosely, using the doctrine of "implied powers," so that the new central government could establish a strong nation with an expanding industrial base and increased trade with Great Britain. Each man sought to persuade Washington of the correctness of his perspectives. Washington attempted to follow a middle path, but Jefferson, a strict constructionist who believed in a narrow interpretation of the Constitution, decided that the president had adopted Hamilton's perspective after he supported the establishment of a national bank under the broad interpretation of the Constitution. Jefferson became the leader of those opposed to the Federalists and Hamilton's programs; he helped to found an opposition press and what became known as the Democratic-Republican Party.

Finally convinced that he could not persuade Washington to adopt his perspective or stop Hamilton while both were serving in the cabinet, Jefferson decided to retire to Monticello in 1793. For the next three years, his supporters and other opponents of Hamilton and the Federalist Party worked to secure Jefferson's election to the presidency. In 1796, although Jefferson did no campaigning, he received only three fewer electoral votes than Federalist John Adams and therefore was elected vice president.

Relations between Jefferson and Adams were cordial at first (in fact, the two men had been close friends for years), but Adams's decision to support most of Hamilton's programs and the Alien and Sedition Acts earned Jefferson's
Jefferson opposed the Alien and Sedition Acts on the grounds that they stifled free speech and political opposition. He even went so far as to claim in his so-called Kentucky Resolutions (as James Madison did in the Virginia Resolutions) that states could declare the acts null and void.

The tumult caused by the Alien and Sedition Acts, the growing international crisis precipitated by the French Revolution, and the domestic conflict arising from Hamilton's national economic development program culminated in Jefferson's election to the presidency in 1800 after an acrimonious campaign between himself and Adams. Jefferson's taking office, however, was delayed several weeks as the result of a controversy caused by a flaw in the Constitution. Aaron Burr, the vice presidential candidate, had received as many electoral votes as Jefferson because at that time there was no distinction made on the ballots between candidates for president and vice president. The man with the most votes became president, and the second-place finisher became vice president. In the event of a tie, the election was automatically thrown into the House of Representatives. Burr briefly capitalized on the confusion in the House to try to usurp Jefferson's election and win the office himself, but Hamilton's advice to Federalists to vote for Jefferson as the lesser of two evils helped settle the matter. The Twelfth Amendment remedied this defect in the Constitution by changing the procedure for the election of president and vice president.

During his first term in office, Jefferson reduced the national debt, cut taxes, and sought unsuccessfully to reduce the power of the Federalist-dominated judiciary. Although he believed in a strict constructionist interpretation of the Constitution in theory, in practice he was more flexible. When a unique opportunity was provided by France's emperor Napoleon to purchase the Louisiana Territory, Jefferson committed the United States to the sale although the Constitution did not specifically authorize the government to acquire foreign territory. The only foreign conflict he faced at this time was in ordering the small American navy to blockade Tripoli to suppress the raids of Barbary pirates on American shipping. Although the military effects of the action were mixed, the action was extremely popular, and the securing of a favorable treaty in 1805 with Tripoli seemed to justify his resort to force. His efforts to have western Florida included in the Louisiana Purchase failed, but overall, his first term was remarkably successful, and he was easily reelected in 1804.

Jefferson's second term was dominated by efforts to protect American neutral trade rights as warring England and France both established naval blockades against each other. The British impressment of seamen was a constant grievance, and when a British ship fired upon and boarded a U.S. naval frigate, the *Chesapeake*, in 1807, the American public might have backed a declaration of war. Jefferson, who never wanted to resort to war and opposed constructing a large navy, decided to rely on economic pressure tactics. First the Nonimportation Act of 1806 was tried, then the Embargo Act of 1807. Unfortunately, these acts required Americans not to attempt to trade with their principal clients, England and France, and brought economic havoc to merchants as well as to shippers. New England, the maritime center of America, was especially hurt. In addition, enforcement of the embargo required infringements upon the very individual rights that Jefferson heralded as inviolate. The result was that by the time he left office in 1809, even though the Embargo Act had been repealed, he was the target of considerable public hostility.

The furor was not sufficient to prevent the election of Jefferson's chosen successor, Madison, however. Jefferson retired to Monticello secure in the knowledge that his policies would be continued.

Retirement to Monticello in 1809 did not mean inactivity. Before his death, Jefferson achieved one more major goal, the establishment of the University of Virginia. He was also active as the president of the American Philosophical Society (1797–1815). He mended his friendship with Adams and began a long correspondence with his old companion in which they discussed political theory and the state of the country.

Jefferson died on the 50th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1826, shortly after noon and just a
few hours before Adams.

Further Reading


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