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• LIFE & ARTS • IDEAS • THE SATURDAY ESSAY

WHAT REMAINS OF THOMAS JEFFERSON?

UNDERSTANDING THE AUTHOR OF THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE MEANS WRESTLING WITH HIS CONTRADICTORY LEGACIES AS A VISIONARY EGALITARIAN AND A RACIST SLAVEHOLDER.

A statue of Thomas Jefferson at Monticello, his estate in Charlottesville, Va.

NATE PALMER FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

By Jack N. Rakove

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On July 2, 1776, the Second Continental Congress unanimously adopted a resolution stating “That these United Colonies are, and, of right, ought to be, Free and Independent States.” Two days later, after further debate, it approved the Declaration of Independence, the document that, over time, brought eternal fame to its main author, Thomas Jefferson.

John Adams knew which day Americans would venerate. “The Second Day of July 1776, will be the most memorable Epocha, in the History of America,” he wrote to his wife Abigail between the two votes. It would be “celebrated” and “commemorated” by “succeeding Generations, as the great anniversary Festival,” Adams predicted. “It ought to be solemnized with Pomp and Parade, with Shews, Games, Sports, Guns, Bells, Bonfires and Illuminations from one End of this Continent to the other from this Time forward forever more.” Adams got the date wrong, but he was certainly right about how Americans would celebrate independence.

Many Americans are ready to banish Jefferson from the discussion of equality because of his obvious sins against his own declared principles.

Commemoration is a different matter. When Americans commemorate the independence that Americans claimed in July 1776, we think little about the political decision that inspired Adams and much more about the egalitarian language that Jefferson placed in the preamble of the Declaration. Like previous generations, we are still wrestling with the meaning of that language. What has changed is the readiness that many Americans now express to banish Jefferson from the discussion of equality because of his obvious sins against his own declared principles. But how well do we understand what Jefferson took those principles to mean—and how should his views, in turn, affect our perception of Jefferson himself?

Few Americans today could coherently summarize the chain of parliamentary acts that comprised the “long train of abuses” that justified the decision for American independence. By contrast, many of us intuitively know why the Declaration of Independence matters so much. The ringing phrases of its preamble—“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”—form our national political creed. Though we will always debate and dispute what we mean by equality and rights, no one denies the preeminence of these ideas in our political and even moral history.

The Declaration is also the source of Thomas Jefferson’s fame, which is why we continue to debate and dispute his legacy. In the cosmopolitan range of his interests, the tension between his aristocratic lifestyle and his egalitarian commitments, and most important, the manifest contradiction between the stirring language of the Declaration and his life as a

Virginia slaveholder, Jefferson remains the most compelling figure of the American founding generation—but also the most troubling.

Jefferson first went to Congress in June 1775. He was never a major voice in its debates. His colleagues admired him more as a penman. Nor did Congress regard the five members charged with drafting the Declaration of Independence as the most important of the three committees it appointed early that month. Two other committees had more essential tasks. One would draft the Articles of Confederation; the other would prepare a model treaty of alliance, with France as its obvious target. Today only scholars care much about the Articles or the treaty of alliance. By contrast, Jefferson's Declaration has universal importance.

Visitors at Monticello, June 2022 *PHOTO:NATE PALMER FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

A reconstructed slaves' cabin at Monticello.

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Jefferson had spent the first five and a half months of 1776 at home in Virginia, happily isolated at Monticello with his wife Martha. Returning to Congress in mid-May 1776, he confessed, "I have been so long out of the political world that I am almost a new man in it." No sooner had he returned than he began writing letters back to Virginia, suggesting that the colony should call its delegates home. Jefferson believed there was more important work to do in Williamsburg and the other colonial capitals than in Philadelphia. With independence imminent, and British rule effectively ended, the individual colonies were drafting new constitutions. Even before his fellow congressmen summoned his literary talents, he prepared several drafts of a new constitution for Virginia, which he hurried off to friends in Williamsburg.

Jefferson's desire to return to Virginia was deeply connected with the "self-evident truths" he invoked in the opening passage of the Declaration of Independence. The purpose of the Declaration was not to commit Americans forever after to pursuing the principle of individual equality as we now understand it. That was not the issue confronting the American revolutionaries in 1776, nor the reason why independence was proclaimed.

The real purpose of the Declaration was to assert that Americans collectively were entitled to exercise the same rights of self-government as other peoples. The committee framing the Articles of Confederation would give this new people their political identity, and the potential treaty of alliance would enable them "to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them."

This was the context within which the Declaration was drafted. Because there was no prospect of any negotiations or accommodation with Britain, the time had come to sever the last formal link uniting the colonies and the British Empire: the loyalty Americans owed to the king. George III was never the tyrant the Declaration made him out to be. If anything, he was doing his best to enforce the British constitution, which made Parliament the supreme legislature throughout the empire. But Americans had long denied that Parliament was empowered to enact laws binding the colonists "in all cases whatsoever," as its Declaratory Act of 1766 had asserted. For the king to keep sustaining that claim was equivalent to denying Americans the right of self-government.

Yet Jefferson's statement of universal human equality was still part of the text and a premise for its argument. It was there for every reader to freely contemplate and apply to any unjust relation, whether of legal status or race or gender or any other perceived source of inequality or discrimination. Those egalitarian readings began immediately and have never ceased.

Even if Jefferson and his congressional colleagues had more explicit political purposes in mind, they, too, sensed that the appeal to equality had other meanings. The best evidence for this lies in the most significant deletion that Congress made in the draft of the Declaration submitted by Jefferson and his committee. This involved the last, lengthiest and most impassioned of the 17 "repeated injuries and usurpations" comprising Jefferson's original indictment of George III. The final charge placed nearly the entire blame for the existence of plantation slavery on the British monarchy, while further accusing George III of seeking to foment a murderous slave rebellion against the free white population.

Jefferson opened this remarkable passage by asserting that the king "has waged war against human nature itself, violating its most sacred rights of life & liberty" by "captivating & carrying" Africans "into slavery in another hemisphere" or exposing them to "miserable death" in the horrific voyages we now call the Middle Passage. When some of the American colonies had tried to limit the slave trade, the king had "prostituted his negative"—his power to veto colonial legislation—to preserve this "execrable commerce." And now, to compound this "assemblage of horrors," his subordinates in America were inviting the enslaved to rise up against their masters, "murdering the people upon whom he also obtruded them," gaining their liberty by destroying the lives of their owners.

A burial site for enslaved people at Monticello.

PHOTO: NATE PALMER FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Thomas Jefferson's grave at Monticello

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Congress deleted this clause for several reasons. In comparison to all the other charges the draft Declaration leveled against the king, its language was by far the most overwrought. It also could not command a consensus. South Carolina and Georgia opposed the clause because they were still committed to the importation of slaves.

The most important objection, however, was that Congress could hardly support its own claims for political equality with other nations by referring to the market in enslaved labor that sustained the plantation colonies. If the statement that "All men are created equal" was essential to maintain that claim, the slavery question had to be buried, not publicized. The only allusion to slavery that the Declaration retained was the charge that the king "has excited domestic insurrections amongst us." This was a vague reference to the proclamation that Lord Dunmore, the last royal governor of Virginia, had issued in November 1775, offering liberty to any Virginia slave escaping to British forces.

But no editorial revision could erase the contradiction that inhered in the preamble to the Declaration. Given the manifest importance of chattel slavery to the prosperity of both the American colonies and the British Empire, any vigorous affirmation of equality would invite scrutiny of this uniquely radical form of inequality.

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A still deeper historical contradiction was embedded in Jefferson's assault on the slave trade, which claimed that the practice of chattel slavery had been imposed or "obtruded" on colonial planters by the British crown. At first glance, no apology could appear more self-serving. The idea that Americans were somehow compelled by British kings to be slave owners was absurd on its face. If modern scholars know one thing about the Southern planter gentry, it is that their desire to obtain servile and slave labor was always the dominant calculation shaping their economic behavior.

But the active complicity of the British state in the continued expansion of the slave trade was also part of this equation. Beginning with King Charles II and his younger brother and successor, James II, the British monarchy was the primary supporter of the Royal African Company, the monopoly created to immerse Britain in this human commerce. When the company failed to meet colonial demand, the imperial government happily opened the slave trade to other merchants in Britain and the colonies.

In his denunciation of the slave trade, Jefferson gave his Southern countrymen a moral credit they did not deserve. Yet he was also attempting, however naively, to turn a public repudiation of the slave trade into a justification for independence. Even in 1776, Jefferson probably understood that ending the slave trade, "this piratical warfare," would not undermine North American slavery. Alone among the slave systems of the Western Hemisphere, North American slavery no longer required a continuous flow of African

migrants. Ending American participation in the slave trade would mitigate one evil, but it would not alter the greater tragedy of slavery.

To that problem Jefferson eventually offered a different solution. In his "Notes on the State of Virginia" (1785), he described an emancipation bill he purported to have drafted in his thorough revision of the state's legal code. All Black slaves born after its passage would be trained in useful skills and then "colonized" to some other land, where they would be declared "a free and independant [sic] people," supported by an alliance with the U.S. This phrase knowingly echoed the Declaration of Independence.

Jefferson justified his position on two grounds. The first was a bluntly pessimistic opinion that relations between whites and Blacks were already so poisoned that the two races could never live together peaceably. The second argument rested on a racist depiction of the differences between the two peoples and the natural inferiority of Africans. Yet Jefferson ended this rambling account by confessing that these speculations "must be hazarded with great diffidence" and lamenting that "though for a century and a half we have had under our eyes the races of black and of red men, they have never yet been viewed by us as subjects of natural history." In expressing these views, even while conceding their flimsiness, Jefferson was anticipating and helping to legitimate racist ideas that would become far more pronounced and pervasive in the U.S. in the 19th and 20th centuries.

A statue of Thomas Jefferson at Monticello.

PHOTO: NATE PALMER FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Where does this account leave today's historian or citizen trying to assess Jefferson's legacy? Simply disparaging or dismissing him has its satisfactions, but the act of rendering

moral judgment comes all too easily when we scrutinize the past. The great challenge of thinking historically is not to find heroes and villains but to explain why previous generations acted as they did and to understand their complexities and contradictions.

Here Jefferson remains a fascinating figure because, even while accepting and participating in the evils of slavery, he was a genuine and visionary egalitarian. Like other members of the Virginia planter elite, he profited from the wealth he inherited from his father and gained through his marriage. Yet he also wanted to use Virginia's extensive public lands to give free men and women alike enough land to lead the lives of freeholders. In his taste for literature, music, architecture, food and wine, he was a cosmopolitan aristocrat, but he devoted himself to establishing the nation's first statewide scheme of public education. He wanted to bring learning to all the state's free children and to enable the brightest of them to join the governing class.

Tragically, Jefferson's egalitarian sympathy never crossed what Frederick Douglass would later call "the color line" of embedded racial prejudice. His views on race and his actions as a slaveholder rightly upset modern Americans. But many of the questions that he was struggling to confront in the 18th century continue to vex us today. Reckoning with his difficulties, as we celebrate Independence Day, may help us to confront our own.

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