

Thomas Jefferson: President (1801—1809)

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When describing the greatness of Thomas Jefferson as a president, one is haunted by many ghosts. One is the ghost of adulation – “I think this is the most extraordinary collection of talent, of human knowledge, that has ever been gathered together at the White House, with the possible exception of when Thomas Jefferson dined alone” – John Kennedy. Another is the ghost of fear and dislike. Contemporary Federalists have little to say that is good about Jefferson. They consider him to be a conniving, libertine politician who manipulated the masses with his talk about democracy and equality.

Who and what is the real Thomas Jefferson? Is it the agrarian democrat? The defender of states' rights? An abstract Enlightenment intellectual? A Frenchified radical Jacobin revolutionary? The practical agriculturalist, architect and inventor? The lover of the arts? The practical politician? The non-politician who let James Madison do the hard political work? A strict constructionist of the Constitution, or only when it suited his purposes? An agent of the devil? A humanistic Christian? A foe of slavery, or a hypocritical slave who had mulatto children?

Such a list is endless. How, then, does one evaluate Jefferson as a president? As Vernon Parrington has written, “Certainly Jefferson is the most elusive of our great political leaders.”

Perhaps the greatest difficulty in analyzing his presidency is to not let the greatness of his pre-presidential years color one's view of his presidency. Being aware of Jefferson's accomplishments as a writer of the Declaration of Independence and of his challenges to Alexander Hamilton and John Adams in the 1790s can easily cause one to judge his presidency in the light of those accomplishments. This may cause one to rank Jefferson more highly as a president than he actually deserves.

In various polls of historians regarding the “greatness” of presidents, Jefferson has ranked in the top five, usually in fourth or fifth place. The most recent poll of historians by the *Chicago Tribune* in 1983 has Jefferson ranked in fifth place behind Abraham Lincoln, Franklin Roosevelt, George Washington and Theodore Roosevelt. This poll judges presidents in five categories: 1) Leadership Qualities, 2) Accomplishments and Crisis Management, 3) Political Skill, 4) Appointments, and 5) Character and Integrity. In this poll Jefferson does best in such career-

long attributes as Character and Integrity and Leadership Qualities, than in more-to-the-point presidency categories as Accomplishments and Crisis Management and Governmental Appointments. If ranked by Accomplishments alone, Jefferson would be in ninth place among the presidents, after presidents Lincoln, Franklin Roosevelt, Washington, Wilson, Polk, Theodore Roosevelt, Truman and Jackson.

Even Jefferson himself felt things other than his presidency were of greater importance. On his tombstone at Monticello he had listed as his greatest accomplishments, “Author of the Declaration of American Independence, of the Statute of Virginia for Religious Freedom, and Father of the University of Virginia.”

Jefferson’s presidency began in a typically “Jeffersonian” manner with his simply walking two blocks from his boarding house in Washington to his inauguration at the Capitol building. This simple act is indicative of the democratic character he perceived of the presidency. To him, the president was to be a man representative of the nation and its people, and not to be a symbol of elitist authority to be honored by pageantry.

The symbol of Jefferson as the representative of the people is what the Federalists feared most. They feared his being a democratic, agrarian demagogue who would arouse the American masses against the established north-eastern commercial groups. They also feared his egalitarian, rationalistic religious views which it was felt would endanger orthodox, established Christianity. One other fear of theirs was that he would lead the nation to a return to strong states’ rights attitudes which would weaken their efforts to create a strong government.

Fears such as those led New England women to hide their Bibles from view so as not to be destroyed by the “Jacobin Republicans.” Those fears also caused some Federalists, such as the Essex Junto in 1804, to discuss the possibility of creating a separate Northern Confederacy. Truly, many Federalists felt Jefferson was a wild-eyed French revolutionary who would let the guillotine fall on those he called the “monocrats.” They took to heart Jefferson’s statements that the tree of liberty must be watered periodically by the blood of tyrants, and that a rebellion every twenty years was good thing. To the Federalists and Jefferson both, his election in 1800 to the presidency was truly, “The Revolution of 1800.”

That none of the “fears” of the Federalists occurred to the degree they predicted is perhaps one of Jefferson’s major accomplishments in the presidency. As Richard Hofstadter indicates in *The American Political Tradition*, Jefferson as a president proved to be much more

moderate than either his rhetoric or the Federalists' fears had led one to believe. During his presidency Christianity remained and flourished in the nation, although much more "democratic" and less tradition-bound and orthodox. Federalist economic policies such as excise taxes and tariffs were ended, but the keystone of Hamilton's program, the Bank of the United States, remained. In fact, Jefferson continued or only slightly modified so many Federalist programs, that contemporaries and historians alike have said that often Jefferson "Out-federalized the Federalists." This move away from complete states' rights, agrarian Republican policies to eventually a very unstrict constructionist use of the Constitution in the Louisiana Purchase, led many in the party to desert him, such as John Randolph of Virginia.

For Jefferson, what was meant by the phrase in his first inaugural address, "We are Republicans— We are all Federalists," was that often many different methods and attitudes can be used to direct the course of the nation, so long as they benefit the greatest majority of the people of all classes. To Jefferson, America was always to follow the words of the Declaration of Independence that all men are created equal, and endowed by their Creator with the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

Jefferson's presidency almost did not occur. The election of 1800 was thrown into confusion with a tie vote in the Electoral College between Jefferson and Aaron Burr. The Republicans had nominated Burr to be Jefferson's vice-president running mate, and had directed the Republican electors to divide their votes between the two so that John Adams might not become vice-president. The Constitution at the time did not differentiate between a person running for president and vice-president, the Constitution only said person who came in second in electoral votes became the vice-president. In 1796, that was how the Republican Jefferson became the Federalist Adams' vice-president. The Republican electors divided their votes too equally and there was a tie in 1800.

To break the tie, the voting for president went to the House of Representatives. Burr, who had been chosen to be Jefferson's running mate in order to help gain the votes of the state of New York, showed his true character in this situation as he let the balloting go on and on in the House of Representatives. The Federalists were still in control of the House and their hatred of Jefferson caused them to support Burr in this deadlock. Not until February 17, 1801 after 36 ballots, did Jefferson gain the presidency. With great irony, Alexander Hamilton, the long-time foe of Jefferson, felt that Jefferson was the better choice. Hamilton felt Jefferson to be a more

honorable and trustworthy person and the influence of Hamilton aided finally in causing enough Federalists to join with the Republicans in the House to elect Jefferson to the presidency. From this point on Jefferson mistrusted his vice-president. Burr would be Jefferson's vice-president for only one term. A recent historical novel on the life of Aaron Burr by Gore Vidal has attempted to color Jefferson as the villain in the many disputes between the two men, but such a view is not tenable.

As president, Jefferson tried to placate the Federalists, but in one particular he was anxious to remove their influence. This was in their control over the federal judiciary. John Adams, in the last months of his presidency, tried desperately to perpetuate Federalist influence in the national government. He attempted this by appointing to the chief judgeship of the United States Supreme Court the Virginia Federalist and cousin of Jefferson, John Marshall. Adams also had the lame-duck Federalist Congress pass the Judiciary Act of 1801 which created numerous new positions in the federal judiciary, all to be filled by Federalists. Jefferson feared the power the Federalists would have in the courts. Through the courts they could continue to advance the power of the central government over the states, rule in favor of commercial interests over agrarian, and hinder civil liberties as in the judiciary's enforcement of the Alien and Sedition Acts during the Adams presidency.

The creation of the "midnight judges" by Adams was a threat to Jefferson's hopes for his presidency and he needed a way to stop them from taking office. The press of leaving the presidency caused Adams to fail to see that the signed appointments were delivered. Upon taking over the presidency, Jefferson learned of this and directed his Secretary of State, James Madison, not to deliver appointments. The Federalist appointee, William Marbury, took issue with their actions and went to the Federalist-dominated Supreme Court to obtain a writ of mandamus to force Madison to deliver the appointment. What resulted was the noted case of *Marbury v. Madison*.

John Marshall, as the chief justice of the court, showed great political acumen in his handling of the case. Instead of handing down the expected ruling in favor of Marbury, Marshall ruled that it was not in the jurisdiction of the United States Supreme Court to issue a writ of mandamus. This ruling further went on to say that the Judiciary Act of 1789 was unconstitutional because in fact such writs should be issued by inferior federal courts. By dismissing the case from his court, Marshall appeared to be giving Jefferson the political victory

Jefferson desired. In the long run, however, this ruling defused Jefferson's attacks on the Federalist Supreme Court and protected Marshall in his chief judgeship.

Jefferson also tried to have two Federalist judges removed from the judiciary. In the case of U.S. District Judge John Pickering of New Hampshire he succeeded, but in the effort to remove Supreme Court Justice Samuel Chase on impeachment charges of being biased against Republicans when they appeared before him in court, Jefferson failed. Jefferson showed political vengeance in his actions regarding the Federalist judges and history has come to consider Jefferson's actions to be one of his least honorable activities as president.

Generally, Jefferson's greatest accomplishment as president is considered to be his purchase of Louisiana. This purchase from France enabled Americans to have the unlimited land needed to create Jefferson's nation of small agrarian freeholders. At the time of the purchase in 1803, both Jefferson and the Federalists questioned the constitutionality and legality of the purchase. Jefferson concerned himself about the lack of authority in the Constitution of the United States government to purchase land; the Federalists questioned the legality of the purchase on the point of whether Spain had officially turned Louisiana over to France in 1800.

Jefferson perceived that the need of the American people for unlimited land to develop and the unrestricted usage of the Mississippi River outweighed all possible questions about the constitutionality of the purchase. To satisfy his constitutional scruples, he justified the purchase on the treaty-making power granted Congress and the President in the Constitution.

For many Federalists this did not end the issue. Groups in the Federalist Party such as the Essex Junto felt it was now the time to create a separate Northern Confederacy of the northeastern states. With the purchase of Louisiana they felt there was no future for the Federalist commercial interests in what would now be a perpetually agrarian-dominated nation. To aid them in this effort, they enlisted the renegade Republican vice-president, Aaron Burr. With some Federalist support, Burr ran for governor of New York in 1804. If elected he had given evidence of cooperation with the Essex Junto in their secession scheme.

As in 1801, Alexander Hamilton opposed Burr's political machinations and helped cause Burr's defeat in the governorship race. Hamilton's critical remarks regarding Burr led to the noted duel between the two men in New Jersey in July, 1804. Upon Hamilton's death, Burr's political future in the East was ended and he now moved West.

What was Burr up to in the West? Contemporaries and historians alike have debated this issue. Was he plotting a Western secession movement? Were he and his cohort, General James Wilkinson, the military governor of the Territory of Louisiana, plotting to lead a filibustering expedition into Texas and Mexico and create a new nation? Or was Burr a secret agent of Jefferson's who was to maneuver the United States takeover of Texas and Florida as parts of the Louisiana Purchase? No one knows for sure, but in January, 1807 General Wilkinson had second thoughts and ended up having Burr arrested for treason at Natchez, Mississippi.

Burr's treason trial gave the presiding Southern Circuit Judge, John Marshall, the opportunity to embarrass Jefferson and the Republicans. Jefferson was called to testify in person and the trial in Richmond, Virginia, but Jefferson would not fall into Marshall's trap. Jefferson refused to testify in person on the grounds of the separation of powers of the three divisions of the national government. This act of Jefferson's caused Marshall to lose interest in the case and led to the case being dismissed on the grounds of the lack of two witnesses to an actual act of treason.

In November, 1804 Jefferson triumphed over his Federalist opponent for the presidency, Charles C. Pinckney by a 162 to 14 electoral vote victory. That the public approved of Jefferson's and the Republican's stewardship of the national government is shown further by the Republican control of Congress after the 1804 elections, Republicans dominated the House with 116 members to the Federalist's 25, and the Senate had 27 Republican and only 7 Federalist.

Besides Jefferson's success in subordinating the aristocratic-learning Federalists and his successful purchase of Louisiana, his first term had been filled with other accomplishments. American shipping in the Mediterranean Sea was guaranteed as a result of the successful war against the Barbary pirates, and Jefferson had begun to show a maturity in his economic thinking by agreeing with this Secretary of the Treasury, Albert Gallatin, to continue the Bank of the United States and also to support the construction of federal roads such as the National Road.

All was not pleasant for Jefferson, however, as the Federalists and dissatisfied Republicans such as James Callender had continued to spread such rumors as of Jefferson having mulatto children by his slave Sally Hemings. They also delighted in showing how this great "democrat" was in actuality a "vicious" owner of hundreds of slaves. Of greater concern was the development of the "Quid" or "Old Republican" faction within the Republican Party. This group was led by Jefferson's formerly close congressional ally, John Randolph of Virginia. Randolph

and the Old Republicans felt Jefferson swayed too far from Republican principles in his Constitutional justification of the purchase of Louisiana. In addition, they felt Jefferson was coming under northeastern economic influence when he had Congress agree to reimburse those investors who had lost great deals of money in the unscrupulous Yazoo Land Frauds perpetuated by the state of Georgia in its former Mississippi territory.

Rumors of morality and political in-fighting aside, Jefferson entered into his second administration in 1804 with more on his mind than issues such as those. The Napoleonic Wars between France and England and their European allies were causing continuous problems for the United States. English and French restrictions on neutral trade rights were bitterly resented by the United States. In addition, the British practice of impressing supposed British deserters who were serving on American vessels was a blow at American honor and sovereignty.

The impressments issue reached its peak in June, 1807 when the British warship, the *Leopard*, fired at and boarded the American naval vessel, the *Chesapeake*, off of the coast of Virginia. In this incident there were 21 American casualties and four sailors were impressed. The public in all sections of the nation were demanding war, but Jefferson urged moderation. He knew his own policies of reducing the size of the American army and navy to small defensive units had put the nation in no condition to fight a war with England.

By 1808 Jefferson had his fill of the presidency. His recommendation as a Republican successor in the presidency was his vice-president and longtime political ally, James Madison. This did not meet with the approval of Randolph's Old Republican faction and they pushed James Monroe for the nomination. Madison got the nomination, but due to Republican infighting and northeastern and middle Atlantic dislike of Jefferson's Embargo Act, Madison had a smaller victory over Charles C. Pinckney than had Jefferson in 1804. Dissatisfaction with Jefferson's second administration is also evident in the House of Representatives where there were 94 Republican to 48 Federalists as a result of the 1808 voting.

Jefferson is truly a great American president. His greatness, as shown in the 1983 poll on presidents, came from such characteristics as leadership qualities, character, integrity, and political skills. Throughout his whole life he was committed to the advancement of human liberty. As president he continued this effort which he began in the writing of the Declaration of Independence. The growth of the Republican Party into a nationwide political group promoting the will of the people was one of the great accomplishments of his presidency. The purchase of

Louisiana guaranteed the needed land for his concept of agrarian democracy. His willingness to take a broader view of the Constitution and begin to advocate commercial and industrial economic programs shows an economic maturity which would be of benefit to the nation and its people. The highpoint of Jefferson's presidency was the overwhelming reelection victory he obtained from the American public in 1804. Although his second administration floundered on the shoals of the Napoleonic Wars, the American public always recognized his commitment to their freedom, and equality.

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Review Questions:

1. Is the author's portrayal of Jefferson positive, negative, or fairly balanced? Explain and cite examples to support your argument.
2. The author suggests that Jefferson was a "strict constructionist" in constitutional matters, but as president he would sometimes compromise with his philosophy for what he considered to be the overall good of the nation. What is meant by "strict constructionist" in the context of this article?

3. Jefferson wanted to be remembered for only three of his life's many accomplishments; what are these three? Why do you think his presidency is not among these?
4. A complex task of the historian is to arrive at an objective interpretation of people and events based on the available evidence, which must also be judged according to its accuracy. Jefferson proves especially problematical in arriving at an accurate assessment. The fact that Jefferson was a Virginia slave owner often clouds his reputation when he was such an influential advocate of individual liberty. Further complicating matters is the allegation of his detractors that Jefferson had an affair with one of his slaves, Sally Hemings; a charge which has never been proven. How should historians interpret Jefferson's refusal to free his slaves and his alleged affair with Hemings? Should these mar Jefferson's stature in US history? Why or why not? Should Jefferson be judged by modern societal standards, or should he be judged based entirely on his contributions to the US? Explain.