

The Legacy of John Adams and Thomas Jefferson

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First I would like to thank all speakers, commentators and attendees who have participated in this week long conference. For over half a century, John Adams and Thomas Jefferson were at the center of American history- gaining our independence, establishing a new country, setting up of a national government, and the peaceful transition of power from one leader to another. They are important people and it is time for them once again to share a stage.

This afternoon we are going to talk about their legacy. Frank Cogliano of the University of Edinburgh and John Kaminski of the University of Wisconsin will help lead this session. But this is a session open to all of you, for we all have benefited from these two men and have something to say about them.

Merrill Peterson opens the last chapter of his book *The Jefferson Image in the American Mind* with these sentences. “The Great Man makes history- and is consumed by it. He swiftly becomes a symbol, perhaps many symbols, through which men (and women) of different persuasions and at different times seeks to comprehend their experiences and purposes. Confusion and error, legend and myth, wish and aspiration transform the life that has been imaginatively extended in posterity.”

If this is true of one person, how much truer it is when we examine together two men- John Adams and Thomas Jefferson and look at how they worked together to make history. Starting in the early 1770s and concluding with their almost simultaneous deaths, they were men who cast a long shadow.

You cannot control your legacy. You can control who you are, what you learn, what your priorities are, what you try to do and what you accomplish. You cannot control what people think about you during your lifetime and certainly not what history and historians write about you in the decades and centuries after your death.

For both Adams and Jefferson, their legacy was important. Their letters to each other were not written just for the recipient. They were also writing for history.

History and historians judge things differently. Most people are forgotten with their death. Certain people become less important over time. People tell their stories in new ways over the decades. What is important to a time and place may be less so at a different time and place.

We are here today talking about two special men. They were quite different, and yet their lives were intertwined. Together they and a few colleagues accomplished something that few people have- they led a revolution to get their freedom from the most powerful country in the world. Then they helped build a new country with a constitution and a government that has lasted for over two and a quarter centuries. And in one of the great ironies of history, something that no novelist would be allowed to include in a book, they died within a few hours of each other on July 4, 1826, the 50th anniversary of their great triumph, the Declaration of Independence.

Who are these two men? And what are their legacies? We won't reach definitive conclusions, history never does. But hopefully we will raise some questions to think about.

There are Jefferson scholars. There are those who have spent a lifetime studying Adams. What I hope will happen is that future scholarship will study both men- one a New Englander, one a Virginian; one who loved argument and public controversy, one who shied from it; one whose words ring through the centuries, one who at times could become tedious. In the words of their many biographers, they were a tall and a short man, an optimist and a pessimist, a dreamer and a realist, a spendthrift and a frugal man, one whose wife was his outstanding strength and one whose wife dies early in his life. Two very different men and yet their lives, their accomplishments and their legacies are related.

Today there is more interest in both men than there was a century ago. The 1866 edition of *Bartlett's Famous Quotations* contains not one quote of Thomas Jefferson. Subsequent editions of *Bartlett's* began to acknowledge the wisdom of Jefferson, and by 1882, there were eight Jefferson quotes. The current issue of *Bartlett's* has 50 quotes by Jefferson and 25 quotes by John Adams. The recent biography of *John Adams* by David McCullough, with the resulting television series, has brought John Adams back into the spotlight. The large number of books on Thomas Jefferson and the growth of Monticello under Dan Jordan's and Leslie Bowman's leadership have shown how great the interest in Thomas Jefferson is.

In a 1970 address to a group of American historians, Bruce Catton said: "As the world grows more and more complex, and as its complexities come to conceal an increasing number of pitfalls which can drop the whole human race straight down into the starless dark if they are not noticed in time, it becomes more and more important for men to understand their own history, to see how former trials were met, to learn how some of these pitfalls develop, and to get the knowledge they must have if they are to make their way through the perplexing and ominous twentieth century. Above all things, they need to know the story of their own past, and if they don't get it from the historian they won't get it from anybody--not, at least, in a form that will be of any use to them."

As historians, let's look at why we Americans are so fortunate to have had John Adams and Thomas Jefferson at the time they lived and in the places they were. Who were they, what did they learn, what were their priorities, what did they try to do and what did they accomplish?

Their interests and knowledge has been well covered in discussions of their libraries and reading habits. Let's summarize a few of their accomplishments.

John Adams was a delegate to the first and second Continental Congresses. He was a driving force for independence, and proposed George Washington as Commander-in-Chief of the Continental Army. He became head of the Board of War, represented the Continental Congress in Europe, was a major negotiator of the peace treaty and the first Ambassador to Great Britain.

With a new constitution, the question arose who would become the first President. George Washington was elected unanimously to two terms. John Adams, with the second most votes, became Vice President. When Washington retired, the 1796 presidential campaign became the first contested one in America's history. John Adams won with 71 electoral votes and Thomas Jefferson, having won the second most electoral votes with 68, became Vice President. In his presidency, John Adams broke with Alexander Hamilton and other Federalists in order to avoid war with France. In the election of 1800, Jefferson defeated Adams and John Adams retired to Quincy and his farm. Reading, writing, and talking through his 91 years, John Adams was a man full of life.

Thomas Jefferson's public service was extensive: a member of the Virginia House of Burgess, representative to the Second Continental Congress, governor of Virginia, diplomat, minister to France, secretary of state under President Washington, vice president under John Adams, and two term president of the United States.

Jefferson fought for freedom of thought, freedom of religion, equal justice under the law, free public schools and educational opportunity, a state library, and founded the University of Virginia. He had a very specific view of the role of government as the servant and not the master of the people. Abraham Lincoln, in a letter dated April 6, 1858, wrote: "All honor to Jefferson, to the man who ... had the coolness, forecast, and capacity to introduce into a merely revolutionary document, an abstract truth ... that today, and in all coming days, shall be a rebuke to tyranny."

Jefferson believed in the American West. He purchased Louisiana, doubling the size of the country and changing America from an Atlantic seaboard nation to one that spanned the continent.

Dumas Malone wrote a magnificent six-volume biography of Jefferson. He closed the last volume with these words:

He [Jefferson] was limited by his own time and circumstances and he made concessions to the society in which he lived. But he perceived eternal values and supported timeless causes. Thus he became one of the most notable champions of freedom and enlightenment in recorded history.

And so we return to the question- what is the legacy of John Adams and Thomas Jefferson? How did they, so different in background, in temperament and in skill, work so well together?

Based on the papers written for this conference and other readings, I would like to propose four legacies for you to consider.

The first legacy is the United States of America. A country like any other organism is a living thing, which can grow and flourish or can shrink and die. Both men had an immense role in the establishment of this country and its direction. They had faith in the American people and their future. There are no indispensable people in history. But three who can almost claim that honor in the founding of this country are George Washington, John Adams and Thomas Jefferson. America is fortunate that they became our first three presidents.

The American experience was unique and both men believed that America was special and an example for other places and future times. History is filled with examples of people overthrowing one government and replacing it with a dictatorship- Russia, China, Revolutionary France, most of Latin America. There are few, if any, examples of the same people overthrowing one government and replacing it with a democracy. John Adams and Thomas Jefferson were part of the group that did. They worked well together because they both believed America was a very special place. The country was far more important than their personal agendas and they had the ability to work with others for the good of the country.

Another idea apparent in reading about them and listening to the talks this week is that both men were historians- interested in the ideas, accomplishments and failures of the past. They had studied the great thinkers from Plato and Aristotle to Cicero and the ideas of the Enlightenment. They were influenced by them and were able to correspond to each other and to colleagues. They were historians in the world of ideas- knowing the history of Greece, Rome, England, France, Spain and the rest of the world. - ideas on government, the rights and responsibilities of individuals, literature, science, religion, dreams and aspirations and other aspects of mankind. Their libraries and their correspondence showed their familiarity with the best minds of the prior two millennia, the developing ideas of the enlightenment and the successes and problems of prior civilizations.

But they were more than theoreticians, they were doers. John Adams wrote: “You and I have been sent into life at a time when the greatest lawgivers of antiquity would have wished to live. How few of the human race have ever enjoyed an opportunity of making an election of government, more than of air, soil or climate, for themselves or their children!” And so they did.

They were not only readers, they were writers. In books and letters, they defined what they believed, what they intended to accomplish, and what they felt throughout their lives. Their letters to each other in their retirement shows that wisdom can come with age, and that the past can be of value for the future. They showed the power of written words in the Declaration of Independence, *the Notes on the State of Virginia*, *A Report on Weights and Measures*, *A Dissertation on the Canon and Feudal Law*, *A History of the Dispute with America*, *Thoughts on Government*, *A Defense of the Constitution of the United States*, and in literally thousands of letters they wrote for the benefit of their contemporaries and for us today. While the spoken word, television shows, sound bites and e-mail may accomplish some short-term results, they are no substitute for the written word. The writings of John Adams and Thomas Jefferson are with us now, and, with new digital technologies, there is ever increasing accessibility of their words. They can be with you at any time in your office or home.

There may be another- a more personal reason why Jefferson and Adams are studied and important. They understood so much of human knowledge and were true liberal arts scholars.

The Spanish philosopher Jose Ortega Y Gasset, in an interesting book *The Revolt of the Masses* wrote about the barbarism of specialization: “The specialist ‘knows ‘ very well his own tiny corner of the universe; he is radically ignorant of all the rest... Anyone who wishes can observe the stupidity of thought, judgment, and action shown today in politics, art, religion, and the general problems of life and the world by the ‘men of science,’ and of course behind them, the doctors, financiers, teachers and so on.”

John Adams and Thomas Jefferson show the breadth of which a human mind is capable. A lawyer can study the classics, an engineer poetry, a medical doctor history and art, a historian can study science.

There is no limit to the human mind or spirit. It is this that may be their greatest legacy. We, as human beings, can, in our reading and thinking, experience and understand much that that others have learned. The only limits to us as human beings are those we inflict on ourselves. The literary Adams and Jefferson light our way to intellectual growth.

These two men set us on a path. How have we advanced down that road?

Some of the issues they addressed are with us today: the rights and obligations of the individual, the function and organization of government, how the three branches of government should be balanced, the relationship between the majority and the minority in a democracy, the relative responsibilities of the federal and state governments, and the objectives of the United States in a world community. What can we teach the world by example as opposed to force of arms? John Adams and Thomas Jefferson thought about who we are as a people and what is important to us as a nation, questions still pertinent today.

They believed that the function of education, in Jefferson's words, is to make students virtuous, productive citizens, something that has been forgotten in the craze for national testing and the abandonment of the study of history, civics, geography, the arts, literature, and the classics.

This is the reason why both men should be studied, that one should not be just an Adams or a Jefferson scholar, that by looking at them together, we can better understand our history, our country and ourselves.