

“Thomas Jefferson is looking down on you, and he’s dissatisfied!”

The Thomas Jefferson Paradox

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John Adams and Thomas Jefferson: Libraries, Leadership and Legacy

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Several years ago I wrote a book on Thomas Jefferson’s reputation. Unlike Merrill Peterson’s wonderful Jefferson Image in the American Mind which provided a survey of Jefferson’s reputation from 1826 to 1943, my work sought to consider Jefferson’s largely unsuccessful attempts to control his legacy, as well as to trace the Jefferson’s reputation since 1943 (when Peterson ended his analysis). I concluded by observing the disjuncture between the way Jefferson intended to be remembered and the manner in which he has been remembered arguing, “The iconic Thomas Jefferson—admired and vilified by turns—survives. Unfortunately, the Jefferson who stressed the importance of the past as he made and then became part of history has not survived. As a result Jefferson’s legacy has been distorted, obscured and misunderstood.”¹ Today I would like to revisit that conclusion by considering what I call the “Jefferson paradox” which distorts our understanding of Jefferson, before suggesting its possible resolution.

¹ Francis D. Cogliano, Thomas Jefferson: Reputation and Legacy (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2006), 265.

Thomas Jefferson died at Monticello shortly before one o'clock in the afternoon on July 4, 1826, the fiftieth anniversary of the adoption of the Declaration of Independence. At almost the same time in Quincy, Massachusetts, Jefferson's friend and sometime political rival John Adams is reported by his relatives to have said his last words, "Thomas Jefferson survives ...". Five hours later Adams died. The near-simultaneous deaths of the two revolutionary giants on the fiftieth anniversary of their greatest achievement has been seen as providential intervention in the life of the American republic—God's blessing on the United States on its jubilee. We can also read Adams's last words ironically given that Jefferson had just died when Adams supposedly uttered, "Thomas Jefferson survives." Whether Adams actually said those words as he lay dying, the members of his family understood the power of Jefferson's image. The Adams family understood that Jefferson survived in the hearts and minds of his countrymen after his life ended on a Virginia mountain in a way that their forbear did not.³

John Adams's words still ring true. Almost two centuries after his death Thomas Jefferson still survives. He survives in the various monuments erected to honor his achievements. He survives in the hundreds of counties, towns, schools and streets named in his memory. He survives in his home, Monticello, maintained as a museum dedicated to preserving his memory, visited annually by half a million

² This section is adapted from the conclusion of Cogliano, *Thomas Jefferson*, pp. 259-268.

³ The claim that these were Adams's dying words has been called into question, and the story is likely apocryphal. John Quincy reported that his father had said "Thomas Jefferson survives" at around one o'clock on the Fourth, but that "the last word was indistinctly and imperfectly uttered. He spoke no more." Charles Francis Adams, ed. *The Memoirs of John Quincy Adams*, 12 vols. (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1874-1877), 7:133. Adams last words—and the contemporary significance of the simultaneous deaths of Adams and Jefferson—are treated in Andrew Burstein, *America's Jubilee: How A Generation Remembered Fifty Years of Independence* (New York: Knopf, 2001), ch. 11.

people. He survives in his “academical village,” the University of Virginia. Jefferson survives in the many thousands of books and articles on him, the number of which increases inexorably.

Most importantly, Thomas Jefferson survives in his words. His most famous words, the preamble to the Declaration of Independence, have become the American creed and are so well known and so readily identified both with Jefferson and the United States, that in these words Jefferson and America seem to become one. Jefferson survives in his other words as well—his assertions of religious freedom and African inferiority, his wonderful exchanges with Adams and Madison—in his thousands of letters, state papers and memoranda. Jefferson’s words are available in manuscript and print and on the internet. They are available in edited form in various one-volume collections. They are available in the massive Princeton edition of the Papers of Thomas Jefferson. Thomas Jefferson’s life, at least as he wanted it remembered, was very much a life of the mind. In so far as the Papers of Thomas Jefferson present “every known copy of every Jefferson document” for scholars and readers Jefferson survives in its volumes. When completed, sometime in the course of the next two decades, the Papers of Thomas Jefferson will constitute one of the most complete records of an individual life ever assembled.

As a conscientious record-keeper and a student of Enlightenment historiography, Jefferson preserved nearly all of his personal and public papers (with the notable exception of his correspondence with his wife). While the Autobiography and Anas give a clear view of how Jefferson understood his place in history, his papers provide insights far beyond the narrow political concerns that Jefferson believed were suitable for historians to write about. While we know more about Jefferson than ever before owing in large part to his own documentary bequest now

appearing in print, we move further and further from Jefferson's conception of his place in history. Jefferson knew how he wanted to be remembered—he expressed it cogently on his gravestone—as a proponent of natural rights, equality and freedom of conscience, who sought to guarantee these benefits to future generations through education. Unfortunately for Jefferson's legacy—and fortunately for historians—he bequeathed tens of thousands of pages and millions of words to posterity as well as his elegant tombstone. Modern historians have exploited the wealth of Jefferson's papers to explore many different aspects of his life and world. While much attention has been paid to Jefferson's place in the political history of revolutionary America, historians have not generally adhered to Jefferson's whiggish view that the history of the early republic can best be understood as the story of Jefferson's struggle to preserve and promote liberty in the face the would-be tyranny of the Federalists and the British.

For a brief period, from roughly 1940 until 1960, Jefferson's historical image was, more or less, as he would have wished. The image of Jefferson as Apostle-of-Freedom eloquently expressed by Franklin Roosevelt at the dedication of the Jefferson Memorial in 1943 coincided with Jefferson's conception of himself and his place in history. These were years when western liberal democracies, particularly the United States, were confronted first by fascism during World War II and then communism during the Cold War. When Roosevelt dedicated the Jefferson Memorial the nation was fighting for the very principles that Jefferson had stood for. When those ideals were threatened they seemed most relevant. Franklin Roosevelt and later historians like Dumas Malone and Merrill Peterson reflected Jefferson's historical consciousness so well because they believed, along with Jefferson, that the principles he espoused were timeless and universal. Jefferson was at once the embodiment of

American principles and had articulated those principles in such a way as to convey their worldwide applicability.

This Jeffersonian moment passed by the early 1960s as Americans became concerned with the limitations of their society during the Civil Rights movement and disillusioned with their government abroad and at home in the wake of Vietnam and Watergate. Historians no longer followed Jefferson in asserting what America had to teach the world. On the contrary they focused inwardly on the failings of their own society. They rewrote the history of the United States focusing not only on its flawed leaders but on previously marginalized and neglected social groups. In so doing they transformed and enriched our understanding of the American past. They have also called into question the achievements and significance of America's leaders, not least Thomas Jefferson. To be sure Jefferson continued to attract the attention of scholars, general readers, and the public at large. The scholarly focus, however, particularly as it concentrated on questions of race and slavery, became more critical. In recent decades Jefferson came, for many people, to epitomize not America's promise but its limitations.

In November 1992 Douglas L. Wilson, soon to take up the post as director of Monticello's International Center for Jefferson Studies published an article entitled "Thomas Jefferson and the Character Issue" in The Atlantic Monthly. Wilson accused Jefferson's recent critics of presentism, "applying contemporary or otherwise inappropriate standards to the past." According to Wilson, presentism had distorted contemporary efforts to understand the past to such an extent that it had resulted in "the widespread inability to make appropriate allowances for prevailing historical conditions." Owing to their anachronistic and ahistorical reading of the past, Wilson argued, Jefferson's critics, especially where race is concerned, had misinterpreted the

historical record and misunderstood and misrepresented Jefferson thereby diminishing his achievements.⁴

Four years after Wilson's article appeared in The Atlantic, one of Jefferson's harshest critics, Conor Cruise O'Brien, an Irish historian, diplomat and politician, published a scathing portrait of Jefferson in the same magazine. Surveying Jefferson's views on race and politics, O'Brien condemned him as a racist who advocated violent terrorism in opposition to the federal government. O'Brien saw Jefferson as the inspiration for the militia movement of the mid-1990s including Timothy McVeigh, the Oklahoma City bomber. O'Brien concluded that the "liberal-Jeffersonian tradition" was untenable in the modern United States. "I believe," he wrote

That in the next century, as blacks and Hispanics and Asians acquire increasing influence in American society, the Jeffersonian liberal tradition, which is already intellectually untenable, will become socially and politically untenable as well. I also believe that the American civil religion ... will have to be reformed in a manner that will downgrade and eventually exclude Thomas Jefferson. Finally I believe that Jefferson will nonetheless continue to be a power in America in the area where the mystical side of Jefferson really belongs: among radical, violent, anti-federal libertarian fanatics.

O'Brien prophesized that there would be no room for Jefferson in the multi-racial America of the twenty-first century and that while some of Jefferson's ideas—those expressed in the Declaration of Independence but not those related to the French

⁴ Douglas L. Wilson, "Thomas Jefferson and the Character Issue," The Atlantic Monthly, 270:5 (November, 1992), 57-74. This article is available at www.theatlantic.com. Wilson's article is discussed more fully in chapter 7.

Revolution—would continue to resonate in modern America, Jefferson himself would be expelled from the American pantheon.⁵

The Atlantic articles of Wilson and O'Brien epitomize the two main schools of thought on Jefferson in the culture wars of the mid-1990s. Wilson and Jefferson's other defenders recognized their subject's limitations but sought to contextualize and explain them while retaining what they saw as his more valuable contributions to American history and culture. By contrast, Jefferson's critics, and O'Brien was among the more vituperative and uncompromising of these, feel that Jefferson's failures—especially his racism and his relationship with slavery—outweigh his accomplishments. Both sides want to pick and choose. Jefferson's defenders take what they admire and explain or ignore that which is distasteful. His critics, by contrast, ignore the admirable and emphasize Jefferson's flaws. Both groups have a stake in Jefferson. The iconoclast is as obsessed with the icon as the believer who comes to worship before it. This is certainly true with respect to Jefferson. Conor Cruise O'Brien devoted an entire book to demonstrating why Jefferson (but not all of his ideas) should be expelled from a mythic American pantheon. Jefferson's defenders and attackers cling to the uniqueness of Jefferson. He is either uniquely good or uniquely bad.

Thomas Jefferson's defenders, like Douglas Wilson, and his attackers, like Conor Cruise O'Brien stress his uniqueness and, somewhat contradictorily, his representativeness. For them Jefferson may be singularly good or bad, but he also

⁵ Conor Cruise O'Brien, "Thomas Jefferson: Radical and Racist," The Atlantic Monthly, 278:4 (October, 1996), 53-74. O'Brien developed these ideas in a book, The Long Affair: Thomas Jefferson and the French Revolution, 1785-1800 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996). The article that appeared in The Atlantic Monthly closely follows the Epilogue to The Long Affair. Douglas L. Wilson wrote a response to O'Brien's criticism which appeared on The Atlantic's website in October 1996, "Counterpoints: Jefferson Scholar Douglas L. Wilson responds to Conor Cruise O'Brien." Also see Benjamin Schwartz, "What Jefferson Helps to Explain," The Atlantic Monthly, 279:3 (March, 1997), 60-72. All of these articles are available at www.theatlantic.com.

represents America. They echo James Parton, one of Jefferson's first biographers, who wrote in 1872, "If Jefferson was wrong, America is wrong. If America is right, Jefferson was right." As a result Jefferson's virtues become America's virtues and his flaws are America's flaws. From Parton's time to our own Jefferson's admirers and critics have taken the Virginian to represent America. The result is a personalized version of American exceptionalism—"the notion," in Michael Kammen's words, "that the United States has had a unique destiny and history, or more modestly, a history with highly distinctive features or an unusual trajectory"—that when applied to Jefferson further distorts his legacy.⁶

A further consequence of the conflation of Jefferson with America is the central paradox at the heart of Jefferson studies. As I have suggested, Jefferson retains an immediacy and a contemporary relevance unlike any of the other of the American Founders. As Merrill Peterson showed in The Jefferson Image in the American Mind this has been the case since Jefferson's death in 1826. The appeal of Jefferson, and the (impossible) desire of many to win his posthumous imprimatur does much to fuel the study of Jefferson. It is part of the reason that half a million people visit Monticello each year and why so many generous benefactors, large and small, help to fund the study of Jefferson through institutions like Monticello's Robert H. Smith International Center for Jefferson Studies and the Papers of Thomas

⁶ James Parton as quoted in Merrill D. Peterson, The Jefferson Image in the American Mind (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960; repr. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1998), p.234. Michael Kammen, "The Problem of American Exceptionalism: A Reconsideration," American Quarterly, 45 (1993), 1-43, quotation 6. There is a huge literature on American Exceptionalism. For recent examples and reviews of the literature see Ian Tyrrell, "American Exceptionalism in an Age of International History," American Historical Review, 96 (1991), 1031-1055; Byron E. Shafer, ed., Is America Different?: A New Look at American Exceptionalism (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); Jack P. Greene, The Intellectual Construction of America: Exceptionalism and Identity from 1492 to 1800 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993); David K. Adams and Cornelius A. van Minnen Reflections on American Exceptionalism (Keele: Keele University Press, 1994); George M. Frederickson, "From Exceptionalism to Variability: Recent Developments in Cross-National Comparative History," Journal of American History 82 (1995), 587-604; Seymour Martin Lipset, American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword (New York: Norton, 1996); H. V. Nelles, et al, "Review Essays: American Exceptionalism," American Historical Review, 102 (1997), 748-774.

Jefferson, or by engaging with the writings, broadcasts, and public events, such as this conference, concerning Jefferson. After publishing my book on Jefferson I received email correspondence with readers from outside and inside the academy who had read the book closely and engaged with, and sometimes took exception to, the ideas and arguments that I made concerning Jefferson. This welcome and valuable interest, combined with the sheer volume of information we have on Jefferson thanks largely to his voluminous, fluent and increasingly accessible writings, makes the study of Jefferson possible, interesting and relevant. It also distorts our understanding of Jefferson and his world. This is the paradox of Jefferson studies—the very intense interest the subject generates makes further study possible, while clouding our understanding of the Jefferson. I want to consider how this paradox manifests itself before suggesting a possible way to resolve it.

III

Three examples illustrate a central feature of the Jefferson paradox—the ubiquity of Jefferson and Jefferson’s image in contemporary America, and beyond. At midnight on April 12-13, 2008 a small group of libertarian activists gathered at the Jefferson Memorial in Washington, D.C. and danced silently in honor of Jefferson’s birthday. The National Park Police moved in to stop the tribute and one of the dancers, Brooke Oberwetter—who was moonwalking in tribute to Jefferson—was arrested. As the Park Police arrested Oberwetter one of the libertarians shouted, “Thomas Jefferson is looking down on you, and he’s dissatisfied!” Although she wasn’t prosecuted in the case, in March 2009 Oberwetter filed a civil suit against the Park Police declaring that

Jefferson, “would have been very dissatisfied because he was so willing to speak out against this kind of abuse of authority.”⁷

On March 17, 2009 a new play, Red-Haired Thomas by Robert Lyons debuted at New York’s Ohio Theater. Set on Manhattan’s West Side the play “opens with a scene of a half-naked Thomas Jefferson who congratulates himself for having ‘fathered the most human of all human rights—and the most elusive: the right to pursue happiness.’ He also claims to have fathered two singularly unhappy men: Cliff (Alan Benditt), ‘a delusional dreamer with a penchant for violence,’ and Ifthikar (Danny Beiruti), an immigrant from Asia Minor who runs a newsstand.”⁸ The play examines modern New York life, terrorism, the global financial crisis and family relationships through the men’s imagined relationship with Jefferson whom a reviewer in the New York Times described as “still our shiniest symbol of the democracy that some see as our most valuable export.”⁹

The day after Red-Haired Thomas debuted in New York, the conservative talk-radio host Rush Limbaugh invoked Jefferson in a lengthy attack on President Obama’s response to the global economic crisis. Quoting selectively from Richard Bernstein’s biography of Jefferson Limbaugh opined:

Now we can argue—we can argue, ladies and gentlemen, about Jefferson’s assessment of Alexander Hamilton, however, I wish to read this to you again, and I wish to say to you that Thomas Jefferson has just

⁷ Roby Chavez, “Jefferson Memorial Dancer Debate,” www.myfoxdc.com, March 31, 2009, accessed April 2, 2009. For Oberwetter’s complaint against the police see http://media.myfoxdc.com/Documents/dancing_lawsuit.pdf.

⁸ Alexis Soloski, “A Founding Father Prowls the Ohio Theater Stage in Red-Haired Thomas,” The Village Voice, March 18, 2009, www.villagevoice.com, accessed March 19, 2009.

⁹ Anita Gates, “City Life Gets a Bit Jeffersonian,” New York Times, March 18, 2009, www.nytimes.com, accessed March 19, 2009.

described the objectives of Barack Obama and the people he has brought into his administration.

Listen to this again: “Jefferson feared that Alexander Hamilton had plans radically at odds with the Constitution.” Check—so does Obama. “As Jefferson saw it Hamilton wanted to warp the federal government out of constitutional shape.” Check—so does Obama. That Hamilton wanted to convert the government “into a copy of the British government.” Check. In modern times we would call this a Western socialist democracy that is the UK—“that is built on debt, built on corruption, built on influence.” Check. Check. Check.

Debt piled upon debt created by Obama. Corruption—we’ve got tax cheats (sic) as the secretary of the Treasury. We’ve got lobbyists running all over the White House after Obama said there wouldn’t be any there. And influence—we have Rahm Emanuel calling members of the media every morning to plan coverage of the Obama administration with the stenographers of the mainstream press. Thomas Jefferson said that Hamilton’s goal was to ally the rich and the well-born with government at the people’s expense. Check.¹⁰

Richard Bernstein responded to what he saw as Limbaugh’s misreading of his work noting “Hamilton’s and Obama’s policies are as different as ham and microchips.” He elucidated the differences, observing the very different contexts in which Hamilton and Obama enacted their fiscal programs concluding, “But those differences did not

¹⁰ Simon Malloy, “This Hour of the Limbaugh Wire brought to you by Thomas Jefferson’s Powers of Foresight,” Limbaugh Wire II, March 18, 2009, <http://mediamatters.org>, accessed March 19, 2009. Limbaugh quoted R. B. Bernstein, Thomas Jefferson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 90.

matter to Limbaugh; what did matter to him was a quick and easy debating point having nothing in common with writing history.”¹¹

These three unrelated events—the arrest of libertarian dancer at the Jefferson Memorial, the debut of an off-Broadway play focusing on Jefferson, and Rush Limbaugh’s invocation of Jeffersonian authority to excoriate Barack Obama—testify to the continuing relevance of, and fascination with, Thomas Jefferson. These are not isolated instances. When I began my research on Jefferson’s reputation several years ago I registered for a Google news alert. Each day I receive a digest of references to “Thomas Jefferson” from the various news media and blogs that Google monitors. In recent months alone this has generated numerous attempts by journalists, commentators, bloggers and letter writers seeking to invoke Jefferson’s authority. Unsurprisingly, they have done so on the issues of the day including the global economic crisis, particularly the bailout of the banks (both for and against); in response to the crisis in newspaper publishing brought about by the internet and the financial crisis; for and against state intervention in religion—and religious intervention in the state.¹²

Jefferson is routinely invoked across the political spectrum. On March 30 the far-right John Birch Society presented a list of quotations by Jefferson on the freedom

¹¹ Richard Bernstein, “At Least He Got My Name Right,” March 26, 2009, http://blog.oup.com/2009/03/bernstein_limbaugh/ accessed March 30, 2009.

¹² Ned Jilton, “Thomas Jefferson Would be Appalled at the Stimulus Package, Bank Bailout,” *Kingsport Times-News* (Kingsport, TN), Feb. 15, 2009, www.timesnews.net, accessed Feb. 17, 2009; Waldron H. Giles, “Jefferson Knew What the Banks Were Really Up to Back When,” *Delawareonline.com*, March 4, 2009, accessed March 4, 2009; Mike Rego, “High Taxes Go Before a Fall,” *Modesto Bee*, March 9, 2009, www.modbee.com, accessed March 10, 2009; David Courey, “How Electronic Readers Could Save Newspapers,” www.networkworld.com, March 2, 2009, accessed March 4, 2009; “A Mainstay of Journalism Collapses,” *University of Minnesota Daily* (Minneapolis, St. Paul) March 4, 2009, www.mndaily.com accessed March 4, 2009; Dan Gilgoff, “Thomas Jefferson on the White House Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships,” www.usnews.com, Feb. 12, 2009, accessed Feb 12, 2009; Joseph L. Conn, “Rolling Back Religious Liberty: Virginia Group Attacks Church-State Separation,” <http://blog.au.org>, March 12, 2009, accessed March 13, 2009; Karl Kofoed, “Jefferson did, in fact, Support Church State Separation,” *Delaware County Daily Times* (Primos, Penn), March 16, 2009, www.delcotimes.com, accessed March 19, 2009; James B. Price, “Beliefs Can’t Be Exercised if they Violate Federal, State Law,” *Springfield News-Leader* (Springfield, Mo.), March 16, 2009, www.news-leader.com accessed March 19, 2009.

of the press to argue against government support for ailing newspapers.¹³ A week earlier in an extraordinary statement, the right-wing Republican congresswoman, Michelle Bachmann invoked Jefferson to call for armed resistance to the Obama administration:

I want the people in Minnesota armed and dangerous on this issue of the energy tax because we need to fight back. Thomas Jefferson told us, having a revolution every now and then is a good thing, and the people—we the people—are going to have to fight back hard if we're going to lose our country. And I think this has the potential of changing the dynamic of freedom forever in the United States.¹⁴

Jefferson is also useful to those on the left. At the end of February 2009 Brent Staples, writing in the New York Times reminded readers of Jefferson's racism in the Notes on the State of the Virginia to demonstrate that a racial caricature recently employed by a cartoonist in Rupert Murdoch's New York Post had a long lineage.¹⁵ More positively, Americans United for Separation of Church and State cited Jefferson

¹³ Ann Shiber, "Bailing Out (Nationalizing) Newspapers," March 30, 2009, www.jbs.org, accessed April 2, 2009.

¹⁴ Kevin Grandia, "Republican Rep Michele Bachmann's Over-the-Top Nonsense," March 24, 2009, www.desmogblog.com, accessed March 30, 2009. Also see Michael Weber, "Time for Bloody Revolution: What Jefferson Didn't Say," www.opednews.com, March 31, 2009, accessed April 2, 2009.

¹⁵ Brent Staples, "The Ape in American Bigotry: From Thomas Jefferson to 2009," New York Times, Feb. 28, 2009, www.nytimes.com, accessed on March 3, 2009. The New York Post had published a cartoon inspired by the killing of a rabid chimpanzee by police in Connecticut. In the cartoon the dead chimp is likened to the author of the recently-adopted economic stimulus bill. Since the bill had been strongly supported by President Obama many interpreted the cartoon as both racist and a call for violence against the president.

as the author of the Virginia Statute for Religious Liberty to oppose measures to undermine the separation of church and state in the Old Dominion.¹⁶

Jefferson has his uses beyond politics and current events. The Washington Times recently suggested that Jefferson deserves credit for introducing macaroni and cheese to the United States, the perfect comfort food for hard times.¹⁷ During the weekend of April 4-5, 2009 a track and field meet between the University of Missouri at Columbia and the University of Virginia featured races dubbed the Monticello Mile and the Continental Congress Steeplechase, stops at a statue of Jefferson, and an after-dinner speech by a Jefferson impersonator—who also awarded pewter goblets to race winners. The event was conceived by the Missouri team coach Rick McGuire who had studied at Virginia (founded by Jefferson) before moving to Missouri (which was acquired by the United States during Jefferson’s presidency) and viewed the contest as a teaching opportunity declaring “A track meet should be bigger than track. And what a wonderful thing to do to take a track meet and build it around a celebration of something as important as this great man.”¹⁸

Enthusiasm for Jefferson is not confined to areas like Virginia and Missouri with direct Jeffersonian connections. On March 10, 2009 a blogger for London’s Daily Telegraph published a series of quotations from Jefferson concerning freedom of religion after advertisements appeared on buses in London and Seattle favoring atheism. Several days later Modern Ghana News cited the example of Jefferson’s bitterly contested 1800 election and his (eventual) reconciliation with his opponent John Adams to argue for a similar reconciliation between Ghana’s New Patriotic

¹⁶ Joseph L. Conn, “Rolling Back Religious Liberty: Virginia Group Attacks Church-State Separation,” <http://blog.au.org>, March 12, 2009, accessed March 13, 2009.

¹⁷ Kathy Hunt, “Comfort from Mac and Cheese,” Washington Times, March 25, 2009, www.washingtontimes.com, accessed March 30, 2009.

¹⁸ David Briggs, “Track Duak Pays Tribute to Jefferson,” Columbia Daily Tribune (Columbia, Mo), April 1, 2009, www.columbiatribune.com, accessed April 2, 2009.

Party and the National Democratic Congress. On April 5, 2009 in a column condemning greed Shmuley Boteach argued in The Jerusalem Post that Jefferson's positive view of human nature had prevailed over Alexander Hamilton's more pessimistic interpretation. "I was raised to believe," wrote Boteach, "that an open democratic society is built on the belief that people are ultimately trustworthy. Did not Thomas Jefferson wage a pitched battle against Alexander Hamilton, the first secretary of the treasury, about the goodness inherent in individuals, with Jefferson's vision winning out?" Each of these writers, on three different continents, presumed their readers would understand their references to Jefferson and grasp his contemporary relevance. What is striking is that Jefferson retains a powerful contemporary relevance. Jefferson is unique in his appeal to pundits, politicians, policy-makers, bloggers, writers of letters-to-the-editor, and ordinary people in the United States and beyond. It is difficult, for example, to imagine a contemporary British prime minister invoking William Pitt in an effort to win support for his or her policies or using "Gladstonian" as a shorthand for all that is good about British political values.¹⁹

Therein lays the Jefferson paradox. Jefferson resonates with the public in a manner unique among historical figures.²⁰ This energizes and fuels the study of Jefferson but obscures and distorts our understanding even as the quality and quantity of Jefferson scholarship increases steadily. Take "Jeffersonian democracy" as an

¹⁹ Shmuley Boteach, "No holds barred: The Rebbe and the Remedy for Greed," Jerusalem Post, April 5, 2009, www.jpost.com, accessed April 5, 2009. Nick Spencer, "What Quotation would You Choose," <http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk>, March 9, 2009, accessed March 10, 2009; Daniel Danquah Dampety, "We Shall Overcome ... But When?" Modern Ghana News (Accra), www.modernghana.com, March 13, 2009, accessed March 19, 2009.

²⁰ Other figures loom large—"Napoleonic" remains a potent descriptor though usually not in a positive way (in the Anglophone world). The image of Winston Churchill is powerful on both sides of the Atlantic and Churchillian as an adjective has positive and potent connotations relative to decisive leadership. Recently, Republicans in the United States have fought to appropriate the posthumous image of Ronald Reagan, though this remains an intra-party phenomenon. Jefferson is unique, however, in the ubiquity of references to him and in their protean quality

example. Exactly two centuries after Jefferson left office “Jeffersonian democracy” is a shorthand for good government premised on the principles of the Declaration of Independence—equality and self-determination. Indeed, in an interview with the Council on Foreign Relations in April 2009 the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Michael G. Mullen stated:

Our success in Afghanistan is tied directly not just to their security but to their overall [success in] having a government that provides for them and having an economic future that makes their lives viable. I don't expect Afghanistan to be a Jeffersonian democracy. That said, they have a freely elected leadership, we're going to have elections again this year.²¹

In a lengthy feature in The New York Times Magazine prior to the invasion of Iraq, Paul Wolfowitz attacked opponents of the prospective war, “You hear people mock it by saying that Iraq isn't ready for Jeffersonian democracy,” sneered Wolfowitz, “Well, Japan isn't Jeffersonian democracy, either.”²² The phrase is not just employed by Americans. In an editorial praising Indonesia’s transition from authoritarian rule to democracy the British newsmagazine The Economist sounded a note of caution

²¹ Interview, Admiral Michael G. Mullen, Nonmilitary Commitments Needed from NATO in Afghanistan, Council on Foreign Relations, April 3, 2009, <http://www.cfr.org/> accessed April 6, 2009, emphasis added.

²² Bill Keller, “The Sunshine Warrior,” New York Times Magazine, Sept. 22, 2002, <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/09/22/magazine/the-sunshine-warrior.html?sec=&spon=&pagewanted=1>, accessed April 6, 2009. “Jeffersonian democracy” was a favorite trope employed by Neoconservatives in the run-up to the war in Iraq. In 2004 Retired General Anthony Zinni complained that the aftermath of the war in Iraq had not been properly planned for by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and his aides: “We were in there talking about Jeffersonian democracy, free market economies, changing the face of the Middle East with this one blow. That was ridiculous, and I think now what we have is young kids paying the price...” “Zinni: U.S. Failed to Plan Iraq War Aftermath,” NPR Morning Edition, May 28, 2004, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1912641>, accessed April 6, 2009.

observing, “Of course Indonesia is not a paragon of Jeffersonian democracy.”²³ If we consider what democracy looked like during the first decade of the nineteenth century when Jefferson served as president—a republic with the franchise limited by gender and race as well as property requirements, where political and economic power was derived in large part (especially for Jefferson’s party) from slave labor, then the United States, like Afghanistan, Iraq, Japan and Indonesia, was not a paragon of Jeffersonian democracy.

IV

How, then, do we resolve the Jefferson paradox? Douglas L. Wilson offered a partial solution to the problem in his Atlantic Monthly article. Wilson’s attack on ‘presentism’ was really a call for historians to contextualize their research. Where Wilson erred was in suggesting that scholars should employ their skills to combat presentism and to defend Jefferson from his critics. Jefferson needs no such defense. Thirteen years ago Conor Cruise O’Brien predicted that Jefferson would be evicted from the American pantheon. He’s still there and will be there for the foreseeable future. Further, scholarship should not be about attacking or defending our subjects. If we attempt to do so then we will fail. As Richard Bernstein, who was the victim of Rush Limbaugh’s misreading of his work, has written:

What do you do when your work is distorted to make or support political claims you don’t accept in the service of an agenda that you don’t share? There is nothing you can do, for you can’t exert the kind of control over uses of your work that would prevent people from misrepresenting your

²³ “Indonesia at a Crossroads,” The Economist, April 2, 2009, http://www.economist.com/opinion/displaystory.cfm?story_id=13413966, accessed April 6, 2009.

scholarship or showing flagrant disregard for the differences between a nuanced historical argument and a political mudfest.²⁴

The best way to address the Jefferson paradox is to ignore it. Historians have no responsibility to attack or defend Jefferson's reputation. Historians should not be in the business of installing our subjects in mythic pantheons (or consigning them to some imaginary purgatory). Attempting to do so is counterproductive. If we produce measured, well-judged scholarship supported by judicious and careful use of evidence it will stand or fall on its merits. As Richard Bernstein reminds us, we cannot control what happens to our work once it appears in print.

The history of Jefferson's involvement with slavery and its treatment by Monticello is instructive. With respect to its treatment of race and slavery the Thomas Jefferson Foundation—which owns and runs Monticello—followed the general trend in Jefferson historiography over the past several generations. Conceived as a patriotic shrine to Jefferson and the principles for which he stood, slavery was neglected or ignored at Monticello during the Foundation's early years. Eventually, in response to the growing literature on Jefferson's relationship to slavery—itsself a product of broader study of slavery in the United States fuelled, in part, by the Civil Rights movement—the Foundation began to consider slavery as an aspect of Jefferson's legacy. In 1989 the Foundation produced a brochure which enabled visitors to follow a self-guided tour of the slave quarters on Mulberry Row. Soon thereafter the Foundation created an African-American advisory panel and in 1993 a themed tour devoted to Monticello as a plantation community commenced which proved very popular. More significantly slavery became a prominent feature of the main house

²⁴ Bernstein, "At Least He Got My Name Right".

tour. In a 1992 memo, all guides were instructed to “make slavery a running theme on every tour; to do this pick up aspects of the theme on four or five of the nine stops.” The guides received advice on how to incorporate slavery by relating it to specific objects and rooms, supplied with quotes by Jefferson relating to slavery, and given advice as to how to employ non-prejudicial language in discussing Jefferson’s attitudes and practices with respect to slavery. When DNA testing confirmed that Jefferson was the likely father of at least one child by one of his slaves, Sally Hemings, in 1998, this too was incorporated into the house tour. By the end of the 1990s slavery, so long ignored on the Monticello tour, was one of its central features.²⁵

Although the process was slower at Monticello than among Jefferson scholars more broadly, the Thomas Jefferson Foundation’s history of dealing with slavery and race followed the arc of the historiography. Half a million people per year visit Monticello—far more than read scholarly monographs and journal articles. Through the house tour they are exposed, albeit indirectly, to the fruits two generations of outstanding scholarship on Jefferson and slavery. This is far more effective than engaging in public disputes with the intention of “attacking” or “defending” Jefferson. The solution to the Jefferson paradox is to ignore it and to write history that will stand the test of time. Jefferson’s reputation is not, and should not be, our concern. We need to have faith in the ability of readers, viewers and museum visitors to exercise their

²⁵ Elizabeth [Dowling Taylor] to Guides, 27 July 1992, Re: The interpretation of slavery on our tours. This advice was expanded upon in Elizabeth Dowling Taylor, *Important Themes in the Interpretation of Slavery at Monticello*, Nov. 1994, revised Oct. 1996; and Jay Boehm, *Incorporating Slavery into Your House Tour*, May 1997; Lucia C. Stanton, *Sally Hemings (1773-1835)*, Nov. 1989, revised Oct. 1994; Lucia C. Stanton, *The Hemings-Jefferson Controversy: A Brief Account*, March 1995, revised Nov. 1998. All of these documents are in the *Guides’ Handbook*, Thomas Jefferson Foundation Archives *Guides’ Handbook*, Thomas Jefferson Foundation Archives, Jefferson Library, Monticello. David Ronka, “DNA Results Discussed,” *The Moose and Elk: The Monticello Guides’ Newsletter*, 5:2 (Winter, 1998-99), 2-3.

judgment and reach their own conclusions. The solution to the Jefferson paradox is faith in the public that is, I dare say, Jeffersonian.