

Jefferson Handout Week One: Thomas Jefferson and the Empire of Liberty (Sept 12, 2012)

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This course will examine the enigmatic character of our third president and the role he played in the early years of the Republic. We will first provide the background for Jefferson's long public career by mapping the key intellectual and political contours of his era, and then explore five major themes that run through his life: his radical revolutionary ideology, his friendships with fellow Founders John Adams and James Madison, his lengthy feud with Alexander Hamilton, his often-contradictory stance on slavery, and finally his equally puzzling and ever-shifting theories on the proper republican approach to the administration of political power. We hope thereby to explicate the endlessly fascinating mindset of an energetic, creative, yet deeply flawed American genius. The course will rest largely on the work of five respected contemporary American scholars of the Revolutionary/Federalist Era: Gordon S. Wood, Joseph P. Ellis, Nancy Isenberg, Andrew Burstein, and Annette Gordon-Reed. But we will also take a retrospective look at an earlier generation of Jefferson admirers: biographers such as Merrill Peterson and Dumas Malone. As with our study of Lincoln, our watchword for the course will be "What tough times these are for icons." (Washington Post, 10/17/92)

Today we open our investigations of Jefferson by placing his thought in context. Like all the Founding Fathers, he was a product of the Enlightenment. Consequently, we must trace the influences on our subject of European thinkers such as John Locke, Francis Hutcheson, and Condorcet. We will attempt to show that Jefferson's positions on religious freedom, economic policy, land usage, and educational reform stemmed largely from classic Eighteenth Century rationalist philosophy. But we will also consider the Romantic dimensions of Jeffersonian thought. In exploring this theme, we must consider his emotional attachment to the soil and agrarian lifestyle of his native Virginia, and his near-mystical fascination with the vastness of the American West. Additionally, we will summarize the three major political developments that provided the historical setting for his life's work: the American and French Revolutions, the nation-building phase of the early Republic (1783-1800), and the world wars of 1756 to 1815. Admittedly, this is a great deal of ground to cover in one period. But it will be necessary to enable students to place Jefferson's attitudes and decisions within the tapestry of contemporary European thought.

Terms to know:

Articles of Confederation- Our young nation's first governing document. Lasting only a few years (1781-87) before being replaced by the Constitution, the Articles were woefully inadequate to the task of harnessing our national potential. Under the Articles, the central government lacked potency and energy. The Articles didn't allow the government to tax citizens directly, did not have a Chief Executive, and left most public legal functions in the hands of the thirteen states. The Articles couldn't even successfully enforce trade regulations between the states.

republicanism with a small “r”—the form of government universally embraced by all good Enlightenment thinkers. The exact antithesis of aristocratic and monarchical government, with all its pomp and privilege, republicanism represented the triumph of reason and virtue. Eighteenth Century thinkers in both Europe and America looked to ancient Rome as the paradigm of sober, ascetic republican government, now happily resurrected in modern day North America.

Republicans-Not to be confused with today’s Republicans, this political movement in the 1790’s advanced the cause of farmers, small (and sometimes not so small) businessmen, and northern artisans/laborers. Vigorous opponents of banks, wealthy merchants, and manufacturers, the Republicans formed the first political party in America, in opposition to the moneyed interests of the big northeastern cities. Led by Jefferson, James Madison, James Monroe, Benjamin Rush, Aaron Burr, and others, the Republicans were the “out group” during the first years of the republic, but gradually gained influence during the many crises of the late 1790’s and finally assumed power as a result of the election of 1800. Republicans were pro-French and violently anti-British in their foreign policy, and were strong defenders of limited government and States’ Rights in their domestic thought.

Federalists-The dominant political/economic actors during the first years of the new American government, from 1789-1800. Led by George Washington, Alexander Hamilton, John Adams, Fisher Ames, Gouverneur Morris, and others, Federalists stood for a vigorous, powerful central government backed by a sound financial community which would put the nation on a solid footing. Generally centered in the northern cities, Federalists advocated a pro-British, anti-French foreign policy, since they desired strong economic ties with the Mother Country. Openly elitist in their outlook, Federalists scoffed at the Republicans’ faith in “The People”—“Your people, sir, are a great beast!” Hamilton once snorted—and demanded that governmental power should be wielded only by the “better sort.”

Whig (or “Country Whig”)- Eighteenth Century English term referring to the anti-royalist, opposition outlook. Whigs believed in a strictly limited monarchy, with many legal-political safeguards against absolute rule built into the constitution. American thinkers such as Jefferson and Madison adopted much of the Whig philosophy into their political worldview.

Democracy- In the early years of the republic, the term “democracy” was not generally used positively. The term connoted mob rule, or the triumph of the lower orders of society. Almost all Americans at this time—Republicans and Federalists alike—felt that society should be run by a “natural aristocracy”. This did not imply that many Americans advocated a traditional, hereditary aristocracy. Rather, the thinking was that a meritocracy of talented, well-educated men of “liberal” persuasion should lead the new nation.

Quotes of the week: “If Jefferson was wrong, America is wrong. If America is right, Jefferson was right.” James Parton, 1874

“It is easier to reach a confident opinion about the sort of man he was in 1776 than to do so for 1793 or 1800.” Dumas Malone, 1948

