

Thomas Jefferson and the Empire of Liberty Course Proposal for OLLI Program, 2012

Mick Chantler (707) 996-2087 mickchantler@gmail.com

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 mind set 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)

WEEK ONE: THE AGE OF ENLIGHTENMENT AND REVOLUTION

We will 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, emotional dimensions of Jeffersonian thought. 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.

WEEK TWO: THE REVOLUTIONARY PHILOSOPHER AT WORK

This talk will focus on Jefferson's best-known works of revolutionary propaganda: A Summary View of the Rights of British America, the Declaration of the Causes and Necessity for Taking Up Arms, and of course his magnum opus, The Declaration of Independence. We will analyze the

development of his constitutional reasoning in these documents, as well as comment on his dazzling literary style. Before leaving these works, we will also speculate on the quasi-paranoid psychology embedded in his arguments, a rhetorical extremism that has had repercussions down to the present day in American politics. This discussion will also delineate Jefferson's attempts at implementation of his radical political philosophy during his years as wartime Governor of Virginia, as Minister to France, and as President Washington's Secretary of State. We will offer examples of his successes and failures in these arenas, and show how frequently even moralist revolutionaries must make compromises in light of intractable political realities.

WEEK THREE: PARTNERSHIPS WITH ADAMS AND MADISON

Jefferson established long and productive--if sometimes strained--professional and personal friendships with two very different Founding Fathers: John Adams and James Madison. This presentation will delve into the roots and review the results of their collaborative efforts. The relationships were unlikely in some ways: the hedonistic Southerner Jefferson seemed an odd match for the astringent New Englander who opposed slavery. Jefferson trusted that "the people" could successfully run their own affairs with a minimum of government interference, while Adams eyed the masses with suspicion. Yet both were ardent patriots who believed wholeheartedly in the revolutionary experiment and were willing to hazard their lives on the outcome. While their friendship suffered a total breakdown over the bitterly fought issues of the 1790's, they eventually reconciled and wrote lengthy, amicable letters to one another during their retirements. We will see that Jefferson and Madison, as Virginia-centric slaveholders, were closer philosophically than Jefferson and Adams. They worked closely to safeguard civil liberties and defend the states from Federalist encroachments. While most historians have assumed that the older Jefferson was the mentor and Madison the student, we will look at newer interpretations that grant a greater role to the latter and regard Madison as a moderating, steady influence on the fiery Sage of Monticello.

WEEK FOUR: RIVALRY WITH ALEXANDER HAMILTON

Just as the names of Lincoln and Douglas, or Kennedy and Nixon, are forever linked in the American political psyche, Hamilton and Jefferson played the roles of archetypal enemies in the early days of the Republic. Indeed, Jefferson's contentious relationship with the Treasury Secretary defined the terms of American political discourse during the Washington Administration. While the godlike Washington tried to remain serenely above the tumult, his lieutenants engaged in a political bloodletting that nearly tore the infant Republic apart. We will show how the contestants disagreed bitterly on almost every aspect of public life: foreign

affairs, economic policy—specifically the debate over the national debt, the Bank, and international commerce—and the very meaning of the Constitution. We will demonstrate how the struggle between these talented and committed heavyweights gave rise to the party system in American politics and created the parameters for the lasting split in the American body politic into “conservative” and “radical” wings. (Although even in their lifetimes, it was sometimes hard to say who represented the conservative side of the argument.)

WEEK FIVE: JEFFERSON’S SHADOW—LIBERTY’S APOSTLE ON RACE AND SLAVERY

No treatment of Jefferson would be complete without a close analysis of his complex, sometimes tortuous views on slavery. He once described slavery as akin to “holding a wolf by the ears—one can neither hold on nor let go without danger.” This week we will examine the lifelong tug-of-war between Jefferson’s practical side and his conscience. From the time he arrived at the Second Continental Congress in a splendid carriage drawn by four spirited horses and with three slaves in tow (including one named, ironically, “Jupiter”) it was clear that there was a glaring disconnect between Jefferson’s radical ideals and the practice of his daily life. The author of the “all men are created equal” doctrine owned upward of one hundred and fifty slaves, including one named Sally Hemings. (We will spend some time on the thorny “Sally Question.”) His lavish lifestyle and cherished retreat from the world, Monticello, rested on slave labor. This jarring discrepancy in his character has long embarrassed Jefferson’s admirers and caused some scholars to recast his image into that of a hypocritical bigot. Others remain loyal to the concept of Jefferson as the transcendent moral hero. We will dissect both sides of this ongoing debate and try to arrive at some reasonable conclusions.

WEEK SIX: THE PRESIDENTIAL YEARS

In this lecture we will discuss the Jefferson administrations, beginning with the tumultuous “Revolution of 1800,” in which power passed peacefully from the Federalists to the anti-Federalists. We will show how the author of the famous “Kentucky Resolution”, which defended the rights of the states against the overreach of a strong central government, became, in turn, a vigorous and energetic Chief Executive—occasionally acting outside the strict constitutional boundaries he once advocated. We will discuss his relations with the Judiciary, the First Barbary War, the Louisiana Purchase, the Lewis and Clark expedition, his Indian policy, establishment of the U.S. Military Academy, the Burr Conspiracy, and his attempt to secure American freedom of the seas with his Embargo. This last act was arguably his worst failure as president, triggering an economic meltdown and massive political opposition. Paradoxically, this advocate of limited government found himself employing unprecedented policing powers

to apprehend smugglers. We will also see that, shamefully, he signed into law a bill segregating the Postal Service, making blacks ineligible to carry mail. At the conclusion, we will offer an overall assessment of the Jefferson presidency and see where he ranks in relation to other great presidents such as Lincoln and F.D.R.