Jefferson, Thomas (1743–1826)

Thomas Jefferson was a key advocate of enlightened liberal democracy who served in a range of public offices including president of the United States (1801–1809), vice president of the United States (1797–1801), governor of Virginia (1779–1781), minister plenipotentiary to France (1784–1789), and secretary of state (1790–1793). He made his most lasting contributions, however, with his pen, drafting the Declaration of Independence and writing “A Summary View of the Rights of British America,” Notes on the State of Virginia, and such notable proposed legislation for his native Virginia as “A Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge” and the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom. Though he was a leading member of the slaveholding Virginia gentry, Jefferson based his vision of the American republic on civil equality and the citizen’s political and economic independence, which he sought to achieve primarily through land reform, disestablishment, and public education. Fundamentally, he advocated an agrarian vision of a nation made up primarily of small-to mid-scale farmers in which power was decentralized to the states, in contrast to the strong federal government advocated by the Federalists, especially his political nemesis, Alexander Hamilton. Many of Jefferson’s quotations and ideas have been used by later populists, particularly right-wing populists, who view strong central government as the source of the nation’s ills.

Thomas Jefferson was born on April 13, 1743. Though his mother came from one of Virginia’s first families, the Randolphs, his father, Peter Jefferson, was a rugged, self-made man, who died in 1757 when Jefferson was 14. In 1762, he graduated from the College of William and Mary at Williamsburg. Five years later, he was admitted to the provincial bar after studying law with the colony’s foremost lawyer, George Wythe. In 1769, Jefferson was elected to the Virginia House of Burgesses. During his early years as lawyer and legislator, Jefferson took part in several reform-minded cases and legislative projects.

In 1774, responding to growing tensions with Britain, Jefferson wrote the widely read pamphlet “A Summary View of the Rights of British America,” denying Parliamentary sovereignty over the colonies. Jefferson was chosen to represent Virginia in the Second Continental Congress in Philadelphia in 1775. In June 1776, he was appointed to a committee with John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Roger Sherman, and Robert R. Livingston to draft the Declaration of Independence. Jefferson’s draft was edited initially by Adams and Franklin and then by the Congress, largely to curb its more radical passages.
The Declaration’s assertions that “all men are created equal” and that government’s just powers come from “the consent of the governed” put Jefferson’s commitments to equality and popular sovereignty at the heart of the American political creed (Jefferson 19).

Jefferson left Philadelphia for Virginia in September 1776, seeking to achieve his goals both of civil equality and weakening the aristocracy through legal reform. Because land ownership was central to his conception of an independent republican citizen, he started with land reform. He signaled this commitment in his draft constitution for Virginia, which included a provision that would have entitled adult citizens to acquire 50 acres of land from the state, thereby ensuring their independence. His first targets were the common-law doctrines of primogeniture, which required that the eldest son inherit all of the father’s land, and entail, which allowed persons to require their heirs to keep the land within the family. Both doctrines were designed to keep large estates intact from generation to generation, thereby perpetuating the aristocracy and limiting land availability to yeomen, or small-scale farmers (Jefferson 32). Jefferson’s bill abolishing entail became law in 1776, but his bill abolishing primogeniture was not enacted until 1785. Jefferson expected both reforms to “prevent the accumulation and perpetuation of wealth in select families” and “make an opening for the aristocracy of virtue and talent,” both of which were, for Jefferson, “essential to a well ordered republic” (44, 32). As president, Jefferson continued his land-reform campaign by negotiating the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, one reason for which was that it would provide land and independence for the young nation’s growing population of republican citizens; additionally, it secured the lucrative port of New Orleans, thus expanding access to eastern U.S. and overseas markets for farmers and planters in the Old Southwest.

Jefferson also targeted the inequality caused by established religion, which in Virginia was the Anglican Church (after 1776 known in the United States as the Episcopal Church). As part of his campaign for legal reform, he drafted the Virginia Bill for Religious Freedom, which became law in 1786. Jefferson urged strict separation of church and state to protect the secular realm of politics and the freedom of the individual human mind from the corrupting alliance of church and state, as well as the inequality that resulted from official preference of a particular denomination.

Public education was as essential to Jefferson’s political ideology as land ownership and the separation of church and state. Traditionally, liberal education had been limited largely to the elites. If the republic was to survive, Jefferson insisted, all its citizens would need to be educated enough to be “able to guard the sacred deposit of the rights and liberties of their fellow citizens” (Matthews 365). For Virginia, Jefferson proposed “A Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge,” which outlined an elaborate public school system that would enable the most talented students to rise “without regard to wealth, birth, or other accidental
condition or circumstance” (ibid.). As president, he sought funding from Congress for public education and a national university.

In the 1790s, Jefferson became the spearhead of the Republican faction and the articulator of its popular, agrarian-based ideology. He opposed the fiscal policies of Alexander Hamilton and the Federalists, which were designed to produce an economy based on manufacturing and commerce and a government grounded on support from the nation’s creditors and monied interests. Instead, Jefferson promoted his vision of an agrarian republic, in which all men were educated and owned enough land to be self-sufficient and, therefore, politically independent.

Jefferson was elected president in 1800 and reelected in 1804. His first term was very successful. His second term, however, was marred by increasing hostilities with Britain and a hugely unpopular and failed embargo instituted to address them. He spent his retirement years conducting a memorable correspondence with his old friend and colleague John Adams and playing the central role in founding the University of Virginia, the most enduring act of his campaign for public education. Jefferson died on July 4, 1826, exactly 50 years after the Declaration of Independence was adopted.

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See also: “The Elites”; Shays’s Rebellion (1786–1787)

References


Jones, Mary Harris/Mother Jones (1837–1930)

Mary Harris Jones, better known as Mother Jones, was a prominent labor leader and organizer during the late 1800s and the early 1900s. She gained national notoriety by traveling to areas of labor strife to organize and assist the striking workers. Mother Jones aided the coal miners of West Virginia and Colorado, the steel workers of Pennsylvania, and the streetcar workers in Chicago. She argued for class solidarity and equality through her version of class warfare, which emphasized collective action. She believed that all workers, regardless of skin color or nationality, were one and the same and needed to band together to defeat the capitalists who were keeping