



## 64 THOMAS JEFFERSON

1743 - 1826

Thomas Jefferson, the third President of the United States of America, and the author of the Declaration of Independence, was born in 1743, in Shadwell, Virginia. His father was a surveyor and a successful planter who eventually left a large estate to his son. Jefferson attended the College of William and Mary for two years, but left without receiving a degree. Afterward, he studied law for several years, and in 1767, he was admitted to the Virginia bar. Jefferson spent the next seven years as a practicing lawyer and a planter. He also became a member of the House of Burgesses, the lower house of the Virginia legislature.

Jefferson's first important essay, *A Summary View of the*

*Rights of British America*, was written in 1774. The following year, he was chosen as one of Virginia's delegates to the Second Continental Congress, and in 1776, he drafted the Declaration of Independence. Later that year, he returned to the Virginia legislature, where he played a leading role in the adoption of several major reforms. Two of his important proposals were the *Statute of Virginia for Religious Freedom* and a *Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge*, which concerned public education.

Jefferson's proposals on education included: public elementary education available to all; a state university in which the more gifted could receive a higher education; and a system of scholarships. His educational plan was not adopted by the state of Virginia at that time, although similar plans were later instituted by virtually all the states.

The statute concerning religious liberty is noteworthy in that it provided for complete religious toleration and for the complete separation of Church and State. (Previously, the Anglican Church had been the established church in Virginia.) There was considerable opposition to Jefferson's proposal, but it was eventually passed by the Virginia legislature (1786). The same ideas were soon adopted in the bills of rights of other states, and later in the United States Constitution as well.

Jefferson served as governor of Virginia from 1779 to 1781. He then "retired" from political life. During his retirement, he wrote his only book, *Notes on the State of Virginia*. The book contains, among other things, a clear statement of Jefferson's opposition to the institution of slavery. In 1782, Jefferson's wife died. (They had been married ten years and had six children.) Though he was still fairly young, Jefferson never remarried.

Jefferson soon came out of retirement and entered Congress. There, a proposal of his for a decimal system of coinage was adopted. However, a similar proposal of his for a decimal system of weights and measures (this was *before* the metric system had been devised) was not approved. He also introduced a proposal which would have prohibited slavery in all new states; however it was defeated by a single vote.

In 1784, Jefferson went to France on a diplomatic mission. There, he soon succeeded Benjamin Franklin as the American ambassador. He stayed in France for five years, and was therefore absent from the United States during the entire period in which the United States Constitution was drafted and ratified. Jefferson favored adoption of the Constitution, though like many others he strongly believed that a bill of rights should be included.

Jefferson returned to America in late 1789, and was soon appointed the country's first Secretary of State. Within the Cabinet, a clash soon developed between Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton, who was Secretary of the Treasury and whose political outlook was quite different from Jefferson's. In the nation, supporters of Hamilton's policies eventually came together to form the Federalist party. Supporters of Jefferson's policies joined together to form the Democratic-Republican party, which eventually became known as the Democratic party.

In 1796, Jefferson was a candidate for President, but he came in second to John Adams. Under the constitutional provisions prevailing at that time, he thereby became Vice-President. In 1800, he ran for President again, this time defeating Adams.

As President, Jefferson was moderate and conciliatory towards his former opponents, thereby setting a valuable precedent for the United States. From the standpoint of lasting effect, the most notable governmental action during his term in office was the Louisiana Purchase, which roughly doubled the area of the United States. The Louisiana Purchase, perhaps the largest peaceful transfer of territory in recorded history, helped turn the United States into a great power, and was an event of far-reaching importance. If I thought that Thomas Jefferson were the person principally responsible for the Louisiana Purchase, he would be ranked considerably higher on this list. However, I believe that the French leader, Napoleon Bonaparte, by making the crucial decision to sell the territory to the United States, was actually chiefly responsible for the transfer. If any individual American deserves special credit for the Louisiana Purchase, it would not be Jefferson, who had never envisaged such an exten-

sive purchase, but rather the American envoys in Paris, Robert Livingston and James Monroe, who when they saw the opportunity for an extraordinary bargain, exceeded their diplomatic instructions and negotiated the acquisition of the enormous territory. (It is noteworthy that Jefferson, who wrote his own epitaph, did *not* include the Louisiana Purchase as one of his principal achievements.)

Jefferson was re-elected President in 1804; however, in 1808, he chose not to run for a third term, thereby reinforcing the precedent which George Washington had set. Jefferson retired in 1809, and his only subsequent governmental activity was in connection with the founding of the University of Virginia (chartered in 1819). He thereby saw a portion of the educational program he had suggested to the Virginia legislature forty-three years earlier finally put into practice. Jefferson died on July 4, 1826, the fiftieth anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, after more than eighty-three years of a full and well-spent life.

Jefferson had many other talents besides his obvious political gifts. He knew five or six foreign languages; he was interested in natural science and mathematics; he was a successful planter who engaged in scientific farming. He was also a manufacturer, minor inventor, and skilled architect.

Because Jefferson's talents and personal qualities were so outstanding, it is easy to overestimate the actual influence he has had on history. In assessing his true importance, we should perhaps start by considering the Declaration of Independence, since drafting that is usually considered to be his outstanding achievement. The first thing to note is that the Declaration of Independence is not part of the governing law of the United States of America; its primary importance is as a statement of American ideals. Furthermore, the ideas expressed in it were not original with Jefferson, but were largely derived from the writings of John Locke. The Declaration was not original philosophy, nor was it intended to be; rather, it was meant to be a concise statement of beliefs already held by many Americans.

Nor was Jefferson's magnificent phrasing of the Declaration



*Jefferson's home in Charlottesville, Virginia—the historic Monticello—was built from his own designs.*

responsible for the American decision to declare independence. The Revolutionary War had actually commenced in April 1775 (more than a year before the Declaration of Independence), with the battles of Lexington and Concord. In the months following those battles, the American colonies faced a critical decision: should they demand outright independence, or should they seek a compromise with the English government? In the spring of 1776, sentiment in the Continental Congress was running strongly toward the former alternative. It was not Jefferson, but rather Richard Henry Lee of Virginia, who on June 7 formally proposed that the colonies declare their independence from Great Britain. The Congress decided to postpone a vote on Lee's resolution for a few weeks, and appointed a committee, headed by Jefferson, to meanwhile prepare a public statement of the reasons for declaring independence. (The other committee members wisely permitted Jefferson to draft the statement almost singlehandedly.) Congress took up Lee's motion again on July 1, and the following

day it was brought to a vote and carried unanimously. It was that vote, on July 2, in which the critical decision in favor of independence was made. It was not until after that vote that the text of Jefferson's draft was debated. It was adopted by Congress (with some modifications) two days later, on July 4, 1776.

Even if the Declaration of Independence was not really as important as most people think, would not Jefferson's other achievements still entitle him to a higher position on this list? In his epitaph, Jefferson mentioned the two other achievements for which he most wished to be remembered. One of those, his role as the founder of the University of Virginia, although certainly very praiseworthy, is hardly of sufficient importance to greatly affect his overall position on this list. The other accomplishment, his authorship of the *Statute of Virginia for Religious Freedom*, is quite significant indeed. Of course, the general idea of religious freedom had been expressed by several prominent philosophers before Jefferson, including John Locke and Voltaire. However, Jefferson's statute went considerably further than the policies which had been advocated by Locke. Furthermore, Jefferson was an active politician who succeeded in having his proposals enacted into law, and Jefferson's proposal influenced other states when they drew up bills of rights.

That brings up another question: to what extent was Thomas Jefferson responsible for the adoption of the Federal Bill of Rights? Jefferson was certainly representative of those persons who wanted to have a bill of rights; indeed, he was one of the intellectual leaders of that group. But Jefferson, who was out of the country from 1784 until late 1789, was unable to lead the fight for a bill of rights during the crucial period immediately following the Constitutional Convention, and it was James Madison who played the principal role in actually getting the amendments through Congress. (Congress passed the amendments on September 25, 1789, before Jefferson returned to the United States.)

It might be said that it was not Jefferson's official actions, but rather his attitudes, which have most deeply affected the United States. However, it is rather doubtful to what extent Jef-

erson's ideas are actually accepted by the American people. Many persons who honor the name of Thomas Jefferson support policies quite contrary to his. For example, Jefferson strongly believed in what we today would call "small government." A characteristic phrase (taken from his inaugural address) is, "...a wise and frugal government, which shall restrain men from injuring one another, which shall leave them otherwise free to regulate their own pursuits of industry and improvement..." Possibly Jefferson's viewpoint was right, but the elections of the last fifty years indicate that his words have not convinced the majority of the American public. As a second example, Jefferson was strongly opposed to the view that the final power to interpret the Constitution rested with the Supreme Court, which could therefore declare a law unconstitutional even though it had been passed by Congress. Such a view, he felt, was contrary to principles of democratic government.

The preceding paragraphs perhaps make it sound as if Thomas Jefferson had rather little influence, and does not belong in this book at all. But too great a concern with details can sometimes cause one not to see the forest for the trees. If, instead, one steps back and tries to view Jefferson's career as a whole, one can readily see why he has been described as the "preeminent spokesman for human liberty."

Should Thomas Jefferson be ranked higher or lower than George Washington? American independence and democratic institutions were created by the combined efforts of men of ideas and men of action. While both were essential, I believe that in general the ideas were the more important contribution. On the executive side, George Washington plainly played the dominant role. Credit for the ideas, however, must be divided between a large number of men, including Americans such as Jefferson and James Madison, and Europeans such as John Locke, Voltaire, and many others. It is for that reason that Thomas Jefferson, despite his enormous talents and prestige, has been ranked substantially below George Washington on this list.