Jefferson, Thomas (1743 – 1826)

Definition: Jefferson from Collins English Dictionary

1 Thomas. 1743–1826, US statesman: secretary of state (1790–93); third president (1801–09). He was the chief drafter of the Declaration of Independence (1776), the chief opponent of the centralizing policies of the Federalists under Hamilton, and effected the Louisiana Purchase (1803)

Jeffersonian (ˌdʒɛfəˈsənɪən) adj, n

Summary Article: JEFFERSON, THOMAS
From Encyclopedia of U.S. Political History

1743-1826 Statesman and Third President of the United States

As author of the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson had helped to define America's meaning as a country of reason, individualism, liberty, and limited government. During Jefferson's tenure as secretary of state in the Washington administration, his opposition to the policies of Sec. of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton signaled the growth of formal political opposition and initiated the formation of the Democratic-Republican Party. Elected president in 1800, Jefferson implemented a domestic program that embraced his philosophical commitment to limited government, states' rights, fiscal restraint, and unqualified support for the Bill of Rights. Jefferson's views of government and governance largely defined the political landscape beyond his presidency down through the Jacksonian era of the 1820s and 1830s.

Early Life

Jefferson was born in Shadwell (later Albemarle) County, Virginia, on April 13, 1743. Though he made light of his wealthy upbringing, his mother, Jane Randolph Jefferson, came from one of Virginia's foremost families, and his father, Peter Jefferson, was a member of the landowning gentry. Jefferson attended William and Mary College from 1760 to 1762 and then studied law under George Wythe.

After publishing a political pamphlet titled A Summary View of the Rights of British America in July 1774 as colonial opposition to British rule increased dramatically, Jefferson became known well beyond Virginia. Within the colony, he promoted the theory of natural rights, arguing that the colonies were neither required nor obligated to show allegiance to the British Crown and advocating the radical idea that the colonists had a natural right to govern themselves.

The Declaration of Independence and the Revolutionary Era

In 1776, at the behest of the Second Continental Congress, Jefferson and four others—John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Robert Livingston, and Roger Sherman—produced the Declaration of Independence. Jefferson was its primary author, and a fundamental principle of his political philosophy, embodied in the Declaration, was that government should guard the natural rights of man. When Adams later complained that Jefferson's ideas were "hackneyed," Jefferson replied that the Declaration was
"Neither aiming at originality of principle or sentiment, nor yet copied from any particular and previous writing, it was intended to be an expression of the American mind." Jefferson admitted that he was influenced by others, especially the essays of John Locke, as well as his own "Summary View of the Rights of British America," the Second Continental Congress's "Declaration of the Causes and Necessity of Taking Up Arms" issued in July 1775, and a draft he wrote of a constitution for Virginia. Though much of Jefferson's original draft was cut and its language altered, its author's general intent was not diminished. Most fundamentally, it included his philosophical belief that "that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

In 1776, Jefferson returned to Virginia and served in the House of Delegates. While the Revolution continued, Jefferson, with the help of his former law instructor George Wythe, went to work liberalizing Virginia's slavery laws to make it easier for slaves to gain their freedom. Through James Madison and George Mason, Jefferson introduced a number of bills that individually and collectively embodied other elements of his leveling political philosophy. These bills were fiercely resisted by Virginia's more conservative aristocrats, but each finally was passed. They included the abolition of entail (thus favoring the wide diffusion of property); the end to primogeniture (which was part of a general reform movement that included granting to married women the right to control their own property); limitations on the amount of land an individual could hold; and the disestablishment of the Anglican church. Additionally, Jefferson fought to change the death penalty and succeeded in making education reforms at the College of William and Mary.

In January 1779, the Virginia legislature elected Jefferson governor of Virginia, a post he assumed in June upon Patrick Henry's retirement from the position. That same month, Jefferson introduced a bill on religious liberty, the first proposal of religious liberty to be considered in any state. By proposing "that all men shall be free to profess, and by argument to maintain, their opinions on matters of religion, and that the same shall in no wise diminish, enlarge, or affect their civil capacities," Jefferson was recommending what no state or nation before had ever offered: complete religious liberty for all. Seen by many as a threat to Christianity, the bill, finally passed in 1786, established the principles of religious freedom and the separation of church and state and served as the basis for Amendment I's religion clause. Jefferson, by then abroad as minister to France, was thrilled when, with James Madison's strong support, the act succeeded in giving religious liberty to Virginians. The rest of the nation would have to wait for the Bill of Rights to provide them the same.

In 1780-1781, with a British attack imminent and fearing capture, Jefferson, along with Henry and other Virginian leaders, fled the capital. Members of the legislature charged him with failing to properly defend Richmond. Although he would later refute these charges, Jefferson retired as governor in June 1781. Despite having voted that "an inquiry be made into the conduct of the executive of this state," the Virginia legislature eventually exonerated Jefferson and thanked him for his service.

**Confederation Era**

While still grieving the death of his wife, who died on September 6, 1782, Jefferson returned to his position in the Continental Congress. As chairman of the committee on Western lands established in 1783, Jefferson proposed that the territories should be self-governing. To that end, the Ordinance of 1784, which he drafted, offered the Western territories eligibility for statehood so long as they agreed to remain part of the United States, guaranteed that the new states would be admitted on an equal
footing with the original 13, required them to pay toward reduction of the national debt incurred in the war, and prohibited slavery in the West after 1800. Jefferson, though a slave owner himself, believed that slavery should be excluded from the Western territories to stop the spread of the institution.

That same year, Congress appointed Jefferson minister to France, where he succeeded Benjamin Franklin. While mingling with the French elite, Jefferson attempted to expand markets for American agricultural products, strengthen the alliance with France forged during the American Revolution, and promote American neutrality after the outbreak of the French Revolution. Despite his friendship with the French aristocrats, when the nation's revolution began in 1789, Jefferson sided with the revolutionaries.

While serving as minister to France from 1784 to 1789, Jefferson kept up with current affairs in the United States. Always hopeful that the bonds of national union would be strengthened, he looked with dismay at the weakness of the Confederation government and sectional tensions that grew out of disputes over the right of navigation of the Mississippi River. Though unable to attend the Constitutional Convention in 1787, he stayed informed via correspondence with James Madison. Other than regretting its lack of a bill of rights and imposition of presidential term limits, Jefferson was generally supportive of the new Constitution.

**Washington Administration**

When Jefferson returned to the United States from France in September 1789, he was appointed secretary of state under George Washington. Though he had anticipated returning to Congress, unbeknownst to him Congress had confirmed the appointment, and Jefferson reluctantly accepted it. In his new position, Jefferson frequently found himself at odds with Sec. of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton. The two disagreed over how to pay the debts caused by the war. Hamilton supported the national government’s funding the national debt (much of which was now held by speculators) and assuming the debts of the states. Opponents of the funding scheme, such as Jefferson's friend and political ally James Madison, favored discriminating between the original bondholders and speculators. On the question of assumption, Jefferson believed that each state should be responsible for the debt that it had incurred. After six months of debate, a compromise was arranged. The South agreed to vote for Hamilton's debt proposal in exchange for his support to locate the national capital on the border of Virginia and Maryland, two prominent Southern states.

In 1791, Congress considered a bank bill, drafted and supported by Hamilton, that would create a national banking system for a period of 20 years. Whereas opposition to debt funding and assumption turned on the related issues of fairness and equity, the constitutionality of the proposed national bank was hotly debated. Hamilton insisted that it was within the power of Congress to charter a national bank and that the institution itself was consistent with the implied powers of the Constitution. Jefferson in turn argued that Hamilton was perverting the Constitution. He believed that constitutions were designed to define and limit governmental powers. Article I of the new Constitution, however, gave Congress the power to make all laws "necessary and proper"—wording that Jefferson thought was dangerous to the doctrine of strict construction upon which American liberties were based. He believed that for a measure to be constitutional, it had to be necessary, not just convenient. He also worried that a central bank would unduly expand federal power, and the passage of the bill would establish a precedent for unlimited governmental powers. The final decision was left to Washington, who, feeling it in the best interests of the nation, reluctantly signed the bank bill into law.

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In an effort to end England's economic dominance over America and encourage domestic manufacturing, Hamilton also proposed that the federal government offer financial aid to the country's young industries. He envisioned a country based on investment, industry, and commerce, an endeavor he felt would only be possible through the abolishing of slavery, an institution upon which the South still depended and from which Northern industry profited.

Jefferson vehemently opposed Hamilton's proposal, stating that America's liberty, security, independence, and future were dependent upon agriculture. Jefferson envisioned a country of small farms and independent agricultural yeomen. In his view, a truly republican government rested upon a nation of virtuous, independent citizens. Jefferson would later use Hamilton's economic vision against him, painting him as an elitist whose real desire lay in the creation of a monarchical Britain in the New World. He saw himself as the champion of farmers, craftsmen, and urban artisans who opposed a government that seemed to favor the few at the expense of and to the detriment of the many.

When war broke out between revolutionary France and Great Britain, Jefferson again found himself at odds with Hamilton, now over foreign policy. Washington issued a proclamation of neutrality in 1793. Hamilton supported the president's position, fearing that any support for France would anger Britain and perhaps jeopardize American commerce with an important trading partner. For his part, Jefferson favored support for the revolutionaries, citing France's alliance with the colonies during the Revolution. Hamilton insisted that the alliance was with the government of Louis XVI, which had been overthrown, and thus the alliance was now void. Washington sided with Hamilton, leaving Jefferson dissatisfied in his Cabinet position. Frustrated, he resigned on December 31, 1793.

Growth of Political Opposition and the "Revolution of 1800"

After his resignation, Jefferson returned home to his farm and family. For the next three years at Monticello, he embraced the agrarian life that he idealized and preferred. Though he was often visited by friends, guests from abroad, and his grandchildren, he himself never traveled more than seven miles from the property during that time. Though retired, he continued to follow national and international developments and found himself frustrated with and alarmed by the Federalists' unchecked hold on the government. From atop his private mountain, Jefferson saw Jay's 1794 Treaty with Britain to be "a monument of folly and venality," and President Washington's suppression of the Whiskey Rebellion of 1794 as an unnecessary use of military force. Both the treaty and the uprising in western Pennsylvania furthered the political polarization that had begun during Jefferson's tenure in the Washington administration. In the capital, supporters of the administration, who called themselves Federalists, and its Republican opponents found themselves increasingly at odds over the power of the national government and by extension Hamilton's programs. As formal Republican opposition took shape in Congress, grassroots democrats, like those who fomented the Whiskey Rebellion, aligned themselves against the Federalist administration.

Jefferson was relieved when Washington chose not to run for a third term, but was himself reluctant to run as a presidential candidate in 1796. When John Adams won a narrow Electoral College victory of 71 to 68, Jefferson, who finished second, became vice president. Since both men shared an anti-Hamilton bias, Jefferson assumed that he and Adams would work well together. In the wake of an undeclared war with France from 1798 to 1800, the Adams administration's relations with that nation, one that Jefferson had long admired, deteriorated. New taxes to support defense measures were imposed. When in June and July 1798 the Alien and Sedition acts were passed, any hope of a good working
The relationship between the president and vice president ended.

The Alien and Sedition acts comprised four parts: the Naturalization Act, requiring aliens to reside in the country for 15 years, rather than the current 5-year requirement, before gaining U.S citizenship; the Alien Act, giving the president the power to deport aliens found to be dangerous to the peace and security of the United States (during peacetime); the Alien Enemies Act, allowing for the wartime arrest, imprisonment, and deportation of any noncitizen; and the Sedition Act, imposing punishments upon treasonable acts, including the publishing of "false, scandalous or malicious writing."

Twenty-five Republican editors, including Benjamin Franklin Bache, grandson to Benjamin Franklin, were promptly arrested and their newspapers shuttered. Immediate opposition emerged. Jefferson, fearing that the government was heading toward dictatorship, secretly authored the Kentucky Resolutions. His position was echoed by Madison, who drafted the Virginia Resolution. This argued that the government had no rights that were not specifically delegated by the Constitution, making the Sedition Act’s attack on free speech unconstitutional. Although the resolutions were seen by Federalists as a threat to the supremacy of the national government and to the rule of law, Virginia was the first to endorse the claim that states could not be forced to put unconstitutional laws into effect. Jefferson's Kentucky Resolutions went further, claiming that a state could nullify unconstitutional acts. Taken to their logical conclusion, the Kentucky and Virginia resolutions would have privileged states' rights over national legislation and rendered the national government a nullity.

Federalists had hoped the acts would quiet, if not quash, opposition to the government; instead, they had a polarizing effect, galvanizing Republicans and opening the door to Jefferson's victory in the 1800 presidential election. The campaign of 1800 witnessed several firsts. It was the first time that candidates openly campaigned. It was the first time that two candidates, Jefferson and Aaron Burr, a New York politician and anti-Federalist, ran together on the same ticket. The campaign was also conducted in a time of unprecedented peril. The Federalist attack on free speech and political opposition threatened to undermine the Constitution and republican principles and in their stead establish an autocratic, centralized national government.

Adams, though by now quite unpopular, decided to run for a second term. Hamilton, though a fellow Federalist, detested Adams, who he felt had deserted Federalist principles, and determined to oppose him. As a result, the election ended in a tie between Jefferson and Burr, thus revealing a serious flaw in the Constitution. The two, who ran together, were now forced to vie against each other in the House of Representatives. The Federalists backed Burr. Hamilton, ironically, supported Jefferson, with whom he had many disagreements but whom he trusted more than Burr. Hamilton's influence helped Jefferson to prevail. Jefferson's win would be the beginning of more than 20 years of Republican rule, as well as the demise of the Federalist Party.

**Jefferson's Presidency**

In his inaugural speech, Jefferson attempted to make peace with his political opponents, asking them to bury the partisanship of the past decade and unite for the sake of the country. Jefferson came to power determined to return the nation to what he believed were its first principles: strict construction of the Constitution, states' rights, equal justice for all men under the law, and unqualified support for the Bill of Rights. He had three broad objectives for his administration. First, he was determined to simplify the government in style and substance and to dismantle Hamilton's fiscal program. Second, he hoped to increase the size of the United States to ensure that for the foreseeable future there would be
sufficient available land for his nation of independent yeomen. Finally, he hoped to promote free trade and open markets abroad for these hardworking farmers. Jefferson hoped that these policies would appeal to a majority of Americans, marginalize Federalist opposition, and bring an end to partisanship.

Though Jefferson reduced internal taxes and eliminated the unpopular whiskey tax, he was also able to cut the national debt in his first term by one-third. Jefferson further decreased the national budget by slashing army and navy expenditures. He also allowed the dreaded Alien and Sedition acts to expire. Simplicity and frugality became the hallmarks of his administration.

Jefferson was also successful in expanding the boundaries of the nation. After Napoleon had regained the territory west of the Mississippi River from Spain in 1800, Jefferson was concerned that American shippers would lose the ability to navigate freely on the Mississippi and their right to deposit goods in New Orleans for eventual transshipment to Europe. In 1803, he instructed his minister to France, Robert Livingston, to propose to Napoleon the purchase of New Orleans. Napoleon countered with the proposal that France sell to the United States the entire Louisiana Territory. Livingston, on his own authority, agreed. Although the Constitution allowed no provision for acquiring new lands, Jefferson overcame his strict constructionist principles by insisting the purchase could be effected through the Senate's treaty-making power. Overcoming Federalist opposition both principled and political, Republicans in the Senate approved the treaty, and in the House they appropriated the necessary funds ($15 million) for the Louisiana Purchase. The acquisition added 828,800 square miles of land, doubling the size of the United States, and was the crowning achievement of Jefferson's administration.

Jefferson spent much of his second term on foreign affairs. During the course of the Napoleonic Wars, Britain and France continued to disregard American sovereignty. British contempt for American neutral rights led to the climactic Chesapeake affair of 1807, when the captain of the British ship Leopard attacked and then boarded the American naval vessel in search of deserters from the British navy. Jefferson's decision to reduce military expenditures and downsize the U.S. Navy left him few options for retaliation. He turned to a tactic that had seemed effective prior to the American Revolution: "peaceable coercion"—or economic warfare. The Embargo Act, signed on December 22, 1807, barred all exports. The policy was intended to force the British and French to recognize American rights. Instead, it caused economic difficulties—especially in the commercial North, whose economy depended on exports. Political opposition to the embargo was widespread, as was the smuggling that circumvented its effectiveness. Federalists, who were particularly strong in the Northeast, made significant gains in national and state elections. Near the end of his term, Jefferson signed an act repealing the embargo. He left office dispirited, his leadership under attack and his reputation tarnished.
In this etching from 1808, Pres. Thomas Jefferson is shown addressing a group of disgruntled merchants complaining about the Embargo of 1807. Jefferson is defending the policy, with which he hoped to achieve "peaceable coercion" of the British and the French to recognize American neutral rights. "If we continue the experiment for about fifteen or twenty years, we may begin to feel the good effects," he says as the men complain of full warehouses, starving families, and spoiled goods. The embargo caused major economic problems and much political opposition. (Library of Congress)

Later Life and Legacy

In the final 17 years of his life, Jefferson's major accomplishment was the founding of the University of Virginia at Charlottesville in 1819. The facility was noted for its focus on academics, rather than theology. Jefferson himself handled all of the architectural design, creating a village academy where each building represented and housed a different area of learning. On July 4, 1826, on the 50th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson died at Monticello. Though Jefferson achieved much as president and party leader, he wished to be remembered for three of his roles: as the author of the Declaration of Independence, as the author of the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom, and as the founder of the University of Virginia. These three accomplishments grace his headstone.

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Jefferson's contribution to and views on civil liberties, especially religious liberty and the separation of
church and state, are still regarded as being of paramount importance to the maintenance of America's status as a land of liberty and opportunity. His political principles, which embraced strict construction of the Constitution, a limited national government, a commitment to states' rights, and a defense of the Bill of Rights, reshaped the politics of the early republic and became the political terrain upon which partisan combat in the coming decades would be fought. Though Jefferson was fundamentally opposed to slavery, he did nothing to eliminate it in his public and personal lives. Eventually, tensions over the existence and extension of slavery into his empire in the West in the 1840s and 1850s would sectionalize and destroy the political world of Thomas Jefferson.

Bibliography and Further Reading


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