



Jefferson Today

by Saul K. Padover

AMERICA'S PHILOSOPHER OF DEMOCRACY MAY SHAPE NEW NATIONS

¹ Thomas Jefferson, who died in 1826, looms ever larger as a figure of special significance. Americans, of course, are familiar with Jefferson as an early statesman, author of the Declaration of Independence, and a high-ranking presidential Founding Father. But there is another Jefferson less well known. This is the Jefferson who, as the outstanding American philosopher of democracy, has an increasing appeal to the world's newly emerging peoples.

² Of all the ideas and beliefs that make up the political philosophy known as Jeffersonian democracy, perhaps three are paramount. These are the idea of equality, the idea of freedom, and the idea of the people's control over government. Underlying the whole, and serving as a major premise, is confidence in humanity.

³ To Jefferson, it was virtually axiomatic that the human being was essentially good, and capable of constant improvement through education and reason. He believed that "no definite limit could be assigned" to a person's continued progress from ignorance and superstition to enlightenment and happiness. Unless this is kept in mind, Jefferson cannot be understood properly.

⁴ What did he mean by the concept of equality, which he stated as a "self-evident" truth? Obviously, he was not foolish enough to believe that all individuals are equal in size or intelligence or talents or moral development. He never said that individuals are equal, but only that they come into the world with "equal rights." He believed that

equality was a political rather than a biological or psychological or economic conception. It was a gift acquired automatically by coming into the world as a member of the human community.

⁵ Intertwined with equality was the concept of freedom, also viewed by Jefferson as a "natural right." In the Declaration of Independence he stated it as "self-evident" that liberty was one of the "inherent" and "unalienable rights" endowed by the Creator. "Freedom," he summed up at one time, "is the gift of Nature."

⁶ What did Jefferson mean by freedom and why was it necessary for him to claim it as an "inherent" or "natural" right? In Jeffersonian thought there are two main elements in the idea of freedom. There is, first, people's liberty to organize their own political institutions and to select periodically the individuals to run them. This is political freedom. The other freedom is personal. Foremost in the area of individual liberty, Jefferson believed, was the untrammelled right to say, think, write, and believe whatever the citizen wishes—provided, of course, one does not directly injure one's neighbors.

⁷ It is because political and personal freedom are potentially in conflict that Jefferson, in order to make both secure, felt the need to found them on "natural right." If each liberty derives from an "inherent" right, then neither could justly undermine the other. Experience of the past, when governments were either too strong for the ruled or too weak to rule them, convinced Jefferson of

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the desirability of establishing a delicate natural balance between political power and personal rights.

⁸ This brings us to the third basic element in the Jeffersonian idea: the people's control over government. It is paradoxical that Jefferson, who spent most of his adult years in politics, had an ingrained distrust of government as such. For the then-existing governments of Europe, virtually all of them hereditary monarchies, he had antipathy mixed with contempt. His mistrust of strong and unchecked government was inveterate. "I am not," he said, "a friend to a very energetic government. It is always oppressive."

⁹ Government being a necessity for civilized existence, the question was how it could be prevented from following its tendency to swallow the rights of the people. Jefferson's answer to this ancient dilemma was at variance with much traditional thinking. He began with the postulate that government existed for the people, and not vice versa; that it had no independent being except as an instrument of the people; and that it had no legitimate justification for existence except to serve the people.

¹⁰ From this it followed, in Jefferson's view, that only the people, and not their rulers or the privileged classes, could and should be relied upon as the "safe depositories" of political liberty. This key idea in the Jeffersonian political universe rested on the monumental assumption that the people at large had the wisdom, the capability, and the knowledge exclusively to carry the burden of political power and responsibility. The assumption was, of course, widely challenged and vigorously denied in Jefferson's day, but he always asserted his confidence in it.

¹¹ Confidence in the people, however, was not enough, by itself, to serve as a safeguard against the potential dangers inherent in political power. The people might become corrupted or demoralized or indifferent.

¹² In order to put limits on power, Jefferson felt, it was best to divide it by scattering its functions among as many entities as possible—among states, counties, and municipalities. In order to keep it in check, it was to be impartially balanced among legislative, executive, and judicial branches. Thus, no group, agency, or entity would be able legitimately to acquire sufficient power for abuse. This

is, of course, the theory that is embedded in the Constitution and that underlies the American federal system with its "checks and balances."

¹³ For the control of power or, more specifically, the governmental apparatus itself, other devices had to be brought into play. Of these, two are of special importance: suffrage and elections.

¹⁴ Unlike many contemporaries, Jefferson believed in virtually universal suffrage. His opinion was that the universal right to vote was the only "rational and peaceable instrument" of a free government.

¹⁵ Next to the right to vote, the system of free elections was the foremost instrument for control over government. This involved, first, the election by the people of practically all high government officials, and, secondly, fixed and regular periods of polling, established by law.

¹⁶ To make doubly sure that this mechanism would work as an effective control over power, Jefferson advocated frequent elections and short terms of office, so that the citizens would be enabled to express their "approbation or rejection" as soon as possible.

¹⁷ So this, in substance, is the Jeffersonian philosophy—faith in the idea of equality, of freedom, and in the right to and need for popular control over government.

¹⁸ What, in all this, is relevant to peoples without a democratic tradition, especially those who have recently emerged in Asia and Africa? The rejection of democratic procedures by some of these peoples has been disheartening to believers in freedom and democracy. But it is noteworthy that democratic and parliamentary government has been displaced in areas where the people had no background in freedom or self-rule, and where illiteracy is generally high. Even there it is significant that the new dictatorships are usually proclaimed in the name of the people.

¹⁹ The Jeffersonian assumption that men crave equality and freedom has not been denied by events. Special conditions and traditions may explain nondemocratic political methods for the achievement of certain purposes, but these remain unstable wherever the notion of liberty has begun to gain ground. "The disease of liberty," Jefferson said, "is catching."

²⁰ The proof of this is to be found even in such societies as the Spanish and the Islamic, with their

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ancient traditions of chieftainships where popular eruptions against dictatorial rule have had an almost tidal constancy. And, as for Communist dictatorships, they have not even begun to solve the question of freedom. In the long run, no people, West or East, can escape the Jefferson idea.

²¹ But it is a slow process, as Jefferson well knew. "The ground of liberty," he said, "is to be gained by inches; we must be contented to secure what we can get, from time to time, and eternally press forward for what is yet to get. It takes time to persuade the people to do even what is for their own good."

²² Does Jefferson survive? Indeed he does.

HOW WELL DID YOU READ?

Did you understand the main points?

- 1. Jefferson's importance to newly emerging nations lies primarily in his**
 - A skepticism about established governments
 - B practical view of politics
 - C philosophy of government
 - D experience as President of the United States
- 2. The basic assumption in Jefferson's philosophy was that**
 - A all people are born equal
 - B all people are good and can improve
 - C people exist to serve government
 - D both B and C

Did you grasp the specific ideas?

- 3. Jefferson believed that political freedom and personal freedom are rights that**
 - A seldom conflict
 - B are inborn in a person
 - C both A and B
 - D neither A nor B

4. Jefferson looked upon government as

- A an inherent right
- B an earned privilege
- C a useless invention
- D a necessary evil

5. Jefferson believed that ordinary people

- A always govern themselves wisely
- B might become corrupt or indifferent
- C cannot handle political responsibility
- D must accept privileged classes

6. Jefferson held that the best way to prevent the abuse of power was to

- A give it to a strong central government
- B scatter it among many agencies
- C entrust it to a few superior leaders
- D both A and C

7. Jefferson used the phrase "the disease of liberty" to suggest that

- A too much liberty can be dangerous
- B people exposed to liberty usually catch it
- C liberty is not a natural thing for man
- D the desire for liberty can be eradicated

Did you see the implications?

- 8. The fact that many new dictatorships are proclaimed in the name of the people shows that**
 - A a new kind of democracy is emerging
 - B democratic dictatorships are possible
 - C the dictatorships are weak
 - D democracy is an instinctive urge
- 9. The author asks how much of Jefferson's thought is relevant today, and answers**
 - A possibly all
 - B only that applying to freedom
 - C only that applying to control of power
 - D no one knows
- 10. The author believes that Jefferson's ideas**
 - A are applied in most new nations
 - B will eventually take hold in all newly emerging nations
 - C will need to be modified in the future
 - D will become less necessary in time

LEARN ABOUT WORDS

A. Often you can tell the meaning of a word from its context—the words around it.

Directions: Find the word in the paragraph that means

1. supreme; dominant (2)
2. self-evident (3)
3. unrestrained (6)
4. seemingly contradictory (8)
5. strong dislike (8)
6. long-standing (8)
7. predicament (9)
8. right to vote (13)
9. recommended (16)
10. approval (16)

B. A word may have more than one meaning. Its meaning depends on the way it is used.

Directions: Decide which meaning fits the word as it is used in the paragraph. Write the letter that stands before the meaning you choose.

11. **essentially** (3)
A necessarily
B absolutely
C basically
12. **delicate** (7)
A slight and subtle
B pleasingly refined
C fine in texture
13. **unchecked** (8)
A unsupervised
B untested
C unrestrained
14. **indifferent** (11)
A neutral; impartial
B uninterested; apathetic
C average; ordinary
15. **popular** (20)
A pertaining to all the people
B common; prevalent
C well-liked; widely liked

- C.** *mania* (madness for)
phobia (dread of; hatred for)
algia (pain)
itis (inflammation)

A knowledge of these **suffixes** and combining forms will provide you with a key to the meaning of many unfamiliar words.

Directions: Use *-mania*, *-phobia*, *-algia*, or *-itis* to complete each word so that it fits the definition. Write the word.

16. photo____(aversion to light)
17. neur____(inflammation of a nerve)
18. mono____(excessive interest in one thing)
19. appendic____(inflammation of the appendix)
20. ego____(abnormally excessive love of the self)
21. laryng____(disease identified by hoarseness)
22. nost____(homesickness)
23. phobo____(fear of one's own fears)
24. neur____(pain in a nerve)
25. claustro____(fear of being closed in)

D. Figures of speech used to make language richer and more vivid. Two devices that are often used to lend color to language are **onomatopoeia** and **alliteration**. Onomatopoeia is the use of words whose sounds resemble those associated with the object or action named:

The *puff-puff* of the engine . . .

Wind *whooshed* through the hall.

Alliteration is the use, in a phrase or sentence, of neighboring syllables beginning with the same letter or sound:

Desperate deeds of derring do . . .

Alliteration can result in a sound effect that enhances the meaning of the line.

Directions: Each quotation below contains either onomatopoeia or alliteration. Write **O** or **A**.

26. "An Austrian army, awfully arrayed"
27. "The silvery tinkling of shattering glass"
28. "And far away the booming of the guns"
29. "Dr. Williams' pink pills for pale people"
30. "The crackle and rustle of dry leaves"
31. "A deep but dazzling darkness"
32. "The moan of doves in immemorial elms"
33. "Boldly by battery besieged Belgrade"